

## Harry Potter & the Child of Phoenix

Disclaimer: We've discussed this. I don't own anything! Except for the plot and the characters you've never heard of. They're mine. Mine.

A/N: Here's the official first chapter. PLEASE READ MY PROFILE BEFORE READING CHAPTER ONE! I guarantee you'll be lost without it. If you haven't read book five, don't read the profile. And to warn the rest of you out there, MAJOR BOOK FIVE SPOILERS AHEAD (with my twist on things, of course).

### Chapter One: Burning Recollections

Sweltering.

Not hot. Slightly steaming. But sweltering.

The drought had returned full force to Privet Drive once more, browning the lawns and looming over the wilting flowerbeds. In the dead of heat, no wind ever blew. Not even to ruffle a few chaotic black strands of hair on the lanky young man resting under an open window.

He sat against the tidy walls of Number Four, Privet Drive, hidden amongst dying hydrangeas and begonias, sweat pouring from beneath his ivory skin. The boy sat with his left leg bent, his thin left arm draping over his knobby knee. His right hand toyed with something in his right pocket, unbeknownst to his nosy relatives or snooping neighbors. The long, slender stick made of the finest holly, eleven inches in length.

A wand.

Why such an abnormal and peculiar object was gracing Privet Drive was kept in the utmost secrecy. No one on this sleepy lane knew the deepest, darkest secret residing in the four standing walls of Number Four, Privet Drive, as the Dursley family was just as normal as the next. Except...

The odd boy residing with them. The so-called "incurable juvenile delinquent."

Harry Potter.

He was in no way abnormal to the people of his world. In this shunning, ungrateful humanity, he was viewed a menace. A mere parasite to his loving, generous kin. Every neighbor knew his parents were killed in a car crash, and the quiet, respectable family was rocked to the core when he was placed under their guardianship.

Or so they were told.

Harry Potter was not a normal boy. Not by any standard, truly. That was, if there was such a standard deemed 'normal.' He was a wizard. A magical individual living in an un-magical surrounding. The only people on Privet Drive who knew the truth, were the four individuals dwelling in Number Four.

And an eccentric elderly woman with an insatiable affinity for felines.

At the thought of the geriatric Squib, Harry sighed. He remembered last year, the soul-sucking Dementors attacking his cousin and the young wizard while walking home. He reminisced over the owls swooping in and out of Number Four with letters of expulsion. Harry remembered his trip to grimy Grimmauld Place, and his trial. As he let his mind wander, it drifted to various events occurring the previous year: O.W.L.s, Quidditch, classes....

The Department of Mysteries.

He diligently tried to forget how he almost cost his best friends and classmates their lives, not to mention the entire Order of the Phoenix. But at least one good thing came out of it.

The Minister of Magic finally buckled under his chipping façade and admitted the return of the Dark Lord. The boy snorted derisively at how he was the target of bad publicity for months, news bearers such as the Daily Prophet exaggerated; and in one night, he was back to being the hero of the world of Gullibility.

He absently lifted a finger to trace the lightning bolt-shaped scar on his perspiring forehead, a dark mark of his own. His link to that fateful night in Godric's Hollow. The Boy-Who-Lived, he mentally ran over his celebrity nickname, and snorted once more.

Lived for what?

To have others around him killed? To fall into trouble? Did he live to be a pawn in an upcoming war unbeknownst to the Muggles? Did he live to fail?

Did he live only to die?

Harry furrowed his brows and picked at the brown grass below him. As far as he knew, he only lived to endanger those around him. The countless adventures he sought, mysteries he solved, and people he dragged along for the experience. If you really wanted to call it that, he bitterly mused. Now, more than ever, his schoolboy adventures seemed more like instruction, training. Since he learned of what his destiny was bringing forth, he regarded his lucky encounters as unconscious methods of preparation.

Fingering his wand cautiously, Harry surveyed the world beyond the bushes before him. Taking the words of Mad-Eye Moody to heart, Harry furtively watched the street in front of him. All seemed normal, but when it contained Harry, nothing ever was. Not that he was expecting Voldemort to jump out of the withering shrubs and curse him, but it never hurt to be constantly vigilant.

Sighing in boredom after a few minutes of scanning the area, Harry thought over his uneventful summer thus far. Nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, from what he had viewed on the Muggle news, and the infrequent letters from his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger had no indication of trouble. Their epistles were brief and mundane, he regretted to describe it so, but he was comforted by the fact the two were jaded as well. Then again, the Order of the Phoenix would never alert either teenager of dark occurrences, for fear of another episode reminiscent to the end of the school year. The Order would also warn Hermione and Ron not to say anything in their letters. Dumbledore would warn them.

Harry briefly thought over the concept of Ron and Hermione lying to him about their whereabouts, but shrugged it off as they constantly assured them they were home. Not to mention their home addresses were on the envelopes. With an added note, he only assumed an Order member was watching him at this very moment, as they had last year.

Harry sighed heavily, drawing his knees up to his chest. He heard the house telephone ring and the clicking of heels on linoleum as his Aunt Petunia ran to grab it. With a sickly-sweet, honeyed voice reminding him harshly of his fifth-year Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Harry tuned his aunt out and watched a few passing Muggles.

Dolores Umbridge was the worst addition to the Hogwarts staff other than Severus Snape. Her cruel punishments and imbalanced conclusions made the warm, comforting halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry an uncomfortable experience. Out of hundreds, she sought him out as a troublemaker and punished him accordingly. Glancing at his scarred hand, Harry vaguely made out the words 'I must not tell lies' etched on the back of his hand. Sure, it was fading, but he would never forget the pain he endured as he scratched those words to parchment in his own blood.

Blood.

It was his that made Voldemort come back in his fourth year.

Voldemort.

Harry absently cradled his head at the thought of the name of the wizard who had caused so much pain. He had killed so many—Cedric, his parents, numbers of others—and he'd been this close to losing his godfather. Luckily, the innocent convict sidestepped the spell, sent by his deranged cousin, and escaped certain death. The young wizard ran a hand through his messy raven hair, contemplating that night.

He had nearly gotten the members of the Order killed, only for the prophecy to be smashed. His head ached slightly when he thought of Voldemort once more. The man had snaked through his brain, seizing control of his mind and body, possessing him none-too-gently. Who knew what the sorcerer discovered in his mind: what he could use against him next. It was the most painful experience Harry had ever felt; losing his control to his enemy. He was sure he was going to die, or rather, kill himself.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Harry heard his aunt still conversing avidly over the phone her nameless friend. He sighed,

thinking back to his own best friends. They hadn't written in a few days, but he wasn't worried. He reminded himself to write a letter to the Order today, since tomorrow would be the third day. Hedwig, his trusty snow-white owl, would be delighted to deliver another letter for him, as all she did in between correspondences was hunt and sleep. The Dursleys had taken to Mad-Eye Moody's threat at the train station, and for the most part, left him alone.

Oh, there were the customary glares and short words—not to place the Dursleys on angelic pedestals (the weight of Dudley alone would most likely snap his in an instant)—but they were tolerable.

He sent his letters without conflict, and stayed out of their way. He performed fewer chores than he ever did this summer, mainly washing dishes and cutlery once in a while and mowing the dead lawn. If he wasn't in his room upstairs, he could be found under the living room window, staring at passersby.

Of course, he could do summer work to pass the time, but so far, he had only gotten his Charms essay done. True to the lazy teenager philosophy, he would most likely seek to do them when it was almost too late.

Harry's lids lightly fluttered closed over his emerald eyes, but he had no inclination to take a nap. Nightmares of Voldemort worming through his head plagued him infrequently at nights, leaving his vision mostly blank, but restless. The last thing he needed now was to doze off under the window in this heat and scream out Voldemort's name, startling the neighbors. Exhaling roughly, the young wizard hoisted himself off the ground, dusted off his scruffy jeans of dead grass, and exited the garden down the road. He checked to make sure his wand was still in his pocket, then shoved his hands in them, walking off to nowhere.

He had grown quite a bit since he last noticed himself. One inch away from six feet, Harry expected to grow the remaining inch during the rest of his summer vacation. His cousin, Dudley, was still short and round; he had willingly ballooned to the size of Hagrid, on squat, stubby legs. His parents, naturally, had stated that as a growing championship boxer, he needed his nourishment, but Harry tended to think if he ate anymore, the only thing he would be boxing was the eight-hundred-pound gorilla at the city zoo.

Ambling idly down Magnolia Crescent, Harry viewed the local Muggle children running about at the park. It was rebuilt and gated since its 'unknown vandalizing' last year, which Harry had known to be the work of his cousin and his cronies. Watching a few children on the swings, Harry noted the cheery smiles on their young faces, and the air of exuberance, and he scowled slightly. If they had known what was coming, they wouldn't be so cheerful. Then again, he didn't even know what was coming, since the Order never informed him of anything.

He continued his trek up Wisteria Walk, avoiding the spot last year where Dementors converged on he and Dudley. It was when he first found out Mrs. Figg was a Squib. Peeking at the street signs, he noted he was close by to her residence. Perhaps she wouldn't mind a guest today.

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Trotting up the drive to Mrs. Figg's door, Harry hesitantly rang the doorbell. Deep down, he thought it was a bad idea to disturb the lady, but curiosity and monotony won out, and he was sure the senior citizen had nothing better to do than to converse with her many felines. He'd even listen to her stories and observe her photographs if it meant he didn't have to return to his unnecessary guard of Privet Drive. The padding of feet behind her aging door alerted him to her presence. Telltale grumbles from inside the house signaled to him his disturbance of the elderly lady.

He decided now was as good a time as any to run down the street without her noticing him, but his plans of escape were shattered as the door swung open a crack. The wizened woman glanced him up and down as if to size him up. Harry flashed her a nervous grin. She wore a moth-eaten, faded cardigan and a rumpled skirt, baring her varicose-veined, sun-spotted, fragile legs, and her token tartan slippers.

"What?" she rasped. "There trouble, boy?" she quickly glanced up and down the road and behind Harry. "What?" Harry had no idea what to tell her. That he'd been lonely and bored so he decided to visit? That he'd wanted to visit her cats?

"Er..." he mumbled for lack of a better answer. "I, er...wanted to, um...visit...you?" Her wrinkled eyebrows shot up into her frazzled

gray fringe. Maybe that was the wrong thing to say. Harry visibly relaxed when a small smile graced the Squib's crinkled lips. She opened her door wider to allow the boy in. Her rare smile reminded Harry eerily of his Transfiguration professor, as she seldom grinned at any of her students, let alone anyone in public.

"Come in, come in, yeh," she urged, leaving the small foyer. "Close the door, an' don't let the cats out." Harry hurriedly complied, locking the door behind him. "This way." She hobbled down the familiar short corridor into her sitting room. Immediately, Harry took the smell of aged cabbage, and nearly stumbled over a few gray, white, and orange blurs darting around after each other. Mrs. Figg gestured for him to take a seat.

"Want some tea?" she asked, raspy voice lightening. "Not of'en I get visitors, yeh see." She sat down as Harry declined on the tea offer. "What's both'rin' yeh?" Harry flinched slightly, startled she could read his expressions so well.

"Er, nothing, Mrs. Figg." He murmured. She raised a gray eyebrow.

"I can tell yeh're lyin'," she stated. "Something's up." Her favorite feline, Mr. Tibbles stalked into the room and jumped beside her on the couch. "Look like yeh've got the weight o' the world on yeh're shoulders, yeh do." The wizard sighed heavily, studiously memorizing the beige carpet.

"Maybe I will take that tea." He spoke tiredly. With an aged but informed smirk, Mrs. Figg stood and tottered to the kitchen. She returned a few minutes later with a tray of tea and biscuits. Harry poured her a cup and thanked her, taking his own cup afterward. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, the Squib broke the quiet between the two.

"So yeh've come to visit me," she began, giving Mr. Tibbles a biscuit. Harry sipped his tea and nodded.

"I guess I needed to talk to someone who at least acknowledges the wizarding world," he revealed. "And it is terribly warm outside." Mrs. Figg snorted.

"Warm?" she queried disbelievingly. "Sitting in fire, that's warm. This is hell." Harry chuckled politely and munched on a buttery biscuit.

"Here, here."

"So, besides that, what's on with yeh? No one visits me 'less it's 'portant." She spoke through a mouthful of buttery biscuits. Harry aimlessly shrugged.

"Been a slow day. Nothing about. Dursleys are having a relatively normal day. And I was just thinking," the boy nabbed another biscuit.

"About?" He shrugged again.

"The past few years." He answered. "What with everything that has happened—"

"The ol' coot announcin' the return of You-Know-'Oo, turnin' heads. That's sure to oust 'im out o' office," Mrs. Figg ranted bitterly. Harry smirked.

"I didn't think that he would affect you that much, since you are...well, a Squib." He stated. She nodded jerkily.

"Oh, he affects me, all right." Her aged eyes swiveled around her sitting room, much slower than Mad-Eye Moody's magical one. "Anyone wi' a magic family, e'en though yeh be non-magic, yerself. Squibs are all registered, yeh know." Thinking of all the Squibs he had ever come across, Harry was suddenly struck with a thought.

"Mrs. Figg, have you ever tried the Kwikspell instructional?" Her searching eyes finally fell on him in disbelief.

"Course not," she shot down. "Waste o' galleons and ne'er works." She grasped her teacup and sipped some of the hot liquid. Finishing her tea and pulling out an old, brown album, frayed at the edges, she looked expectantly at the Boy-Who-Lived. "Got some new photos yeh haven't seen before." The young wizard genuinely smiled blissfully. After a bout of directionless conversation and tea, he didn't mind spending the afternoon with crazy Mrs. Figg and an album of felines anymore.

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The hour was late and Harry had finally left the confines of Mrs. Figg's. They had spent the afternoon drinking tea and talking mainly about the wizarding world. Harry was glad he could talk freely for once, and joined Mrs. Figg in her verbal bashing of Minister Fudge.

The sky had grown considerably darker, with vibrant hues of gold, pink and violet painting the dusky atmosphere exotically. The air was still hot with the burning heat of the day, settling uncomfortably around the gangly young wizard. Harry noticed the park was empty now, the swings hanging still, lonesome-looking without the merry children flying back and forth. Just as he turned on Privet Drive, he spotted a few people in the distance on racing bikes. He didn't bother to get a closer look. He had an intense doubt Voldemort and his Death Eaters would ever deliberately assault him on Muggle bicycles, though he was pleased to divulge, the visual was rather amusing.

Crossing the sunburned and parched lawn of Number Four, Harry hopped over the low garden wall stealthily, bending down behind the hydrangeas. He carefully sat back under the window and checked to make sure his wand was still with him. The evening news flowed from the thankfully ajar window, the anchorwoman going on about the drought and the chance for rain in the next week or so. The young wizard heard his uncle complain something about his wilting lawn, and his aunt grouse about her dry flowers. He hadn't heard whining, which meant his cousin was still out. Smoking and even drinking, no less. Dudley had his parents so delusional with his lies about practicing with Piers, that Harry knew they would buy it the second the words left his piggy mouth.

Harry heard the creak of a chair and the padding of loafers across the living room floor. Looking at his watch, he noted it was nearly dinnertime, and Dinky Diddydums never missed a meal. Perchance, Uncle Vernon was to call him on the new cellular phone he had bought for his son as an early birthday gift. He didn't bother to figure out the exciting mystery and stood up for a few minutes, surveying the quiet street lying before him. Streetlights were dimly lit and illumining the cracked pavement below. Harry could just make out a few fifth graders trudging down the street, looking around them cautiously. He suddenly remembered there might have been an Order member following him around all day, but he hadn't heard any apparating cracks all day. Furtively gazing around him, Harry took

one last look at the road and went to the front door, opening it and entering.

He lumbered past the living room and up the stairs without either of his relatives' acknowledgement. It was all the same, since he didn't much care for them either. Once on the landing, Harry wrinkled his nose at a few of the unmoving portraits of Dudley adorning the prim, floral wall, and went to his second bedroom. Luckily, the Dursleys hadn't bothered to lock him in at all during the summer, unless they were headed for something important. Closing the door silently behind him, Harry kicked a pile of dirty clothing from the middle of the room and dropped a few forgotten textbooks into his trunk. He locked his trunk and pushed it aside, finally falling on top of his unmade bed. The springs barely creaked at his flimsy weight, and conformed to his figure. His window was wide open, in case any owls needed to deliver anything, and he could distantly hear the neighbors of Number Six laughing below him.

Raising himself on his elbows, Harry noted Hedwig was not in her cage. A fluttering of wings brought his attention to the window, and through the opening, Hedwig dropped a letter by Harry's legs and landed in her cage. Quirking his brows, Harry pulled himself up, grabbed the letter and settled against his headboard. He recognized Hermione's neat writing instantly, and opened the parchment to hear what his friend had to say.

Harry,

How are things? It's been decidedly languid here. Mum and father have been spending late nights at the dentistry, so I've been here mostly with Crookshanks. I haven't heard anything new from the 'assembly;' mind you, they wouldn't exactly tell us students what was really going on, without diluting it greatly.

I haven't received my O.W.L.s yet. I'm really nervous. I reviewed all of my notes and I truly don't think I did very well.

At this Harry snorted. The day Hermione didn't do very well is the day he and Lucius Malfoy became the best of friends. Or, he was so bold to venture, Voldemort and he called a truce on an account of a budding friendship. Not bloody likely.

To pass time, I've finished all my summer work ("Figures." Harry mumbled), and I've created a N.E.W.T. study guide for all of my classes, spanning first year to fifth year. I think it will really help me get a better grade. I hope you've at least started your work, or created a guide. It helps, you know.

I haven't heard from Ron in a few days, but I asked him to ask his mother if you and I could spend the rest of the summer over there. Mrs. Weasley said she'd ask the headmaster. Other than that, nothing truly big has been happening in the wizarding world, from what I gather. Seldom Death Eater attacks on minor things, but no one's gotten hurt. But I heard a school was destroyed; not the work of evil, but then again, I'm not sure. Hopefully I'll see you soon. If not, we'll keep writing each other.

Love From,

Hermione

So, she was also having an uneventful summer. This eased Harry's mind a bit, and he jumped off his bed. He crossed the room to his desk quickly and sat down. Not only did he need to write Hermione, but he needed to get his Order letter sent, too. Hedwig was tearing at the legs of a dead frog, but Harry wasn't at all fazed. Nearly six years with his 'overgrown pigeon,' as his uncle often fondly referred to her, and he was immune to her choice in wild delicacies. He pulled out a few sheets of parchment and a quill, along with his inkbottle, and began to write the Order first. It was the easiest, as well as the shortest, and he set out to his task.

Remus,

How are you? All is well here. I'm keeping out of trouble, so you all should be thrilled. Hope everything's thrilling on your side.

Harry

Folding the parchment, he set it aside and set to work on Hermione's. She had written a great deal, and a two-sentence response would definitely alert her to something. Yawning, he put his quill to work.

Hermione,

Everything here is all right. Boring, but it usually is. I'm glad to hear you are all right. And trust me, you did fine on your O.W.L.s. You are, of course, the cleverest witch of our year, which you hear almost every day at school.

I have done one essay, and I'll do the rest in the next few days. The way things are moving out here, I may even finish reading all of our textbooks before the end of the week. I visited a Squib in my neighborhood a few hours ago. It felt good to talk about magic freely, for once.

Maybe we'll see each other in the next few weeks. If not, see you on the train.

Harry

Sighing, he signed his name quickly and folded Hermione's letter. Just as he was about to get up and head downstairs for supper, a feathery tennis ball darted into the room, zooming about insanely.

"Pig!" he exclaimed silently. He had a time trying to catch Ron's tiny owl in the air, a letter clutched in his beak. Hedwig hooted crossly in her cage and narrowed her bright amber eyes. After five minutes of chasing, ending in him gently tossing the owl in his bird's cage, Harry opened the letter from his best friend.

Harry,

How's it faring, mate? Nothing eventful happening here. Mum and dad say hello. And Ginny, Fred and George. Summer's been incredibly boring. I practice on my Clean Sweep every day to get better at goalkeeping. Ginny is my chaser, and she's really good. I reckon that ban's off of you now, since Umbridge is gone. So, you're probably still seeker. Since Angelina and Alicia left, you've only got Katie. Ginny can be chaser now, and I don't know if Sloper and Kirke will remain beaters.

Hermione's just sent me a note saying she's finished her holiday work. Typical Hermione. Of course, I haven't started, so I expect to on the train on our way back to Hogwarts. Mum's asked Dumbledore if you could stay over, and he's said later, but at least you'll be here.

How are your relatives treating you now? Have they taken to Mad-Eye's threat?

Fred and George's shop is doing really well. I heard from Lee Jordan they're going to open a shop in Hogsmeade! They'll probably put Zonko's out of business with the way they're going. Mum's proud they're doing so well, and they've bought her and dad a nice set of robes. They're putting most of the money in the family vault, so they can support us. Mum and dad refused, but they insisted. Real nice of them. I reckon we'll be competing with the Malfoys, now.

I'll see you later in the summer. Don't let the Muggles get to you.

Your Friend,

Ron

Harry sniggered at Ron's inane comments and his last statement. He knew Fred and George were the best pranksters since his father's friends, and he wouldn't doubt it if they did surpass the Malfoys in wealth. He rapidly scribbled a lengthy response to Ron and set the excitable Pigwidgeon on his way back to the Burrow.

"Now, girl." He began with Hedwig. "I want you to send this to the Order, then Hermione. If she wants you to wait for a response, wait, all right?" he spoke in a no-nonsense tone. Hedwig hooted in understanding, and Harry rolled the scrolls and attached it to her talon. With one last stroke, Hedwig was on her way to London. The Hogwarts student sighed once more and looked out the window. The residents of Number Six were speaking loudly now, but Harry ignored them and began to clean his room. He hadn't felt like cleaning much, only Hedwig's cage every now and then. Piling dirty clothes in one corner and stuffing his trunk with clean garments, Harry moved onto the books strewn about his room. The young wizard longed for the day when he could use magic liberally to clean his room in seconds.

After stacking his books neatly on his desk, Harry heard the muffled sound of the front door closing. That'd be Big D, he thought casually to himself. The emerald-eyed male exited his room and flopped noiselessly down the steps.

As he entered the kitchen, he noted the dinner consisted of waning salad and dry roast for dinner. Roast mutton from Hogwarts seemed so far away, right about now.

His relatives were already seated at the table, Dudley easily taking one full side for himself, his father, the other, and Petunia's toothpick figure seeming drastically out of place across the empty side. No one spoke or acknowledged Harry's presence as he sat on the free side of the table, kindly pulling two leaves of lettuce and an arid slice of roast on his plate. Dudley and Vernon took most of the salad and roast, whereas his aunt took a leaf from Harry's book and had few things on her salver. Dinner was eaten in a glacial silence, despite the scorching heat breezing through the house. Harry could tell it was going to be a long summer.

"What's with you, boy?" his uncle started. "Met another one of those dismembers?" Harry raised a thick, dark eyebrow at his uncle, until he realized what he meant. Did his uncle actually care about his well-being? This was odd.

"No, Uncle Vernon." He answered as nicely as he could. He didn't want to start a confrontation this early in the summer. "Just thinking." Dudley snorted into his water, and Vernon's rolls shook with mirth. Harry glared. "Yes, Dudley, I can think. Unlike you."

"Now, see here, boy," Vernon shook a sausage-like finger in his face. "You'll not be disrespecting my son under my roof." Harry nodded nonchalantly and waved him off. Back to normal, then, he bitterly thought

"Yeah, yeah, heard it before." The boy expressed in an annoyed tone. "Never back talk to Dinky Dudders, I know." The boy wizard stood from his seat and washed his dishes as Vernon began to blubber in rage, his face changing interesting shades of puce. Harry nodded unflappably in smugness, heading for the steps as Vernon continued to yell at him from the dinner table.

Ah, yes. A long summer.

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A beaming Ron and Hermione waved at him excitedly, surrounded completely by snow. The raven-haired wizard walks back in, waving

along with them, his bright green eyes clearly visible through all the black he wore.

The day had been freezing cold. Everyone had bundled up for a trip on the grounds, throwing snowballs at each other, or transfiguring large branches into sleds, taking to the fresh powder. If he looked closely in the background, he could see Neville Longbottom getting knocked to the ground by Seamus' sled. It was a fun day. Nice and icy.

Not so on Privet Drive.

Harry sighed at the photograph taken before last Christmas, wishing to feel the icy breeze he cursed that day. But it wasn't so bad in the living area in his house. It was much cooler than outside. He didn't feel like sulking in his room, and he found it quite difficult to brood in the volcanic heat outside. His uncle was off at work, and his aunt declared she would be with her garden club all day. All he had was Dudley, but that didn't prove exciting. Dudley would probably be heading out with his friends in a while anyway. Right on cue, a set of rolling thunder could be heard tumbling down the stairwell. Harry didn't pay attention to his cousin and continued staring at his album. He felt considerably warmer when he noticed a large shadow hovering over him.

"Who are those people?" he sneered. "And why would they hang with you?"

"They're called friends, Big D." Harry leered as if talking to a four-year-old. "I'm sure you call your acquaintances goons or something of the like." Dudley scrunched his face in disgust at the moving pictures, paling quickly.

"They move."

"Good boy. Sorry I don't have a treat for you."

"Shut up, Potter." He jeered. "What'd you do?" Harry looked at him curiously. He had only been sitting on the chair thumbing through an album. What could he have done in two seconds?

"Meaning?"

"Come now, you had to have done your abnormality to make them move like that!" he exclaimed. "I'm telling dad!"

"All pictures in my world move," he stated matter-of-factly. "Nothing ever sits still." Dudley narrowed his eyes and left him alone, which he was grateful for. He slammed the front door behind him and left the Gryffindor by himself. Harry sorted through his captured memories once more and yawned. He was dead tired, and his scar prickled somewhat. The boy hadn't gotten any sleep the night before, due to the heat. Since the house was quiet, he figured now would be as good a time as any for a nap. Shutting his album and racing up the steps, Harry shut his door, set the photos aside and hopped in bed. Feeling the warmth and softness of the pillow, Harry was lulled to sleep by the stillness of nature outside his window.

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He could make out the fuzzy bright light aching to burst from behind the drawn drapes. The room was dark, aged dust clinging to the objects in the room like its life depended on it. The blackened hearth before him swirled seductive smoke from its dying embers, making the room smell like burnt cloth. His skeletal, alabaster fingers idly played with a long, slender wand, while his other hand gripped the arm of the elegant wooden chair impatiently. Crimson eyes took in the filthy state of the room, which other than the armchair, contained a moth-eaten auburn rug covering most of the room, a few more dusty armchairs, and a grimy display case. The glass windows were cracked and broken in certain parts, but it could be salvaged. Thick, wooden doors across from him opened with a groan, and a shivering figure clad in dark robes, approached him, his face covered, and his whimpering audible. A silver hand could be seen clasping a flesh-colored one, and the sputtering man stumbled before him.

He knelt before the man and kissed the hem of his robes. He could barely taste the fear in the room the plump man brought.

"M-M-Master," he stuttered. He rose a few seconds later, drops of sweat falling from below the hood.

"Have you discovered anything yet?" a high, cold voice emitted from Harry's throat.



"M-My lord, w-w-we are looking," he stammered. "I-It seems these p-p-particular weapons are h-hard t-t-to come b-by." Hot anger coursed through his veins.

"You've been searching for weeks. And you tell me, you've come up with nothing?" the harsh voice of Harry bellowed. "You've not been looking deeper or far enough!" The round man flinched and Harry caught a glimpse of his rat-like face.

"N-None in the world of w-wizards holds the sword or scepter, m-m-master. W-We have searched every p-p-possible place." He faltered. Harry narrowed his blood-red eyes.

"Evidently, not every place."

"M-Master, we m-may have f-f-found someone who could assist us," he spluttered quickly. This was intriguing.

"And why have you not contacted this person?" he was very annoyed, and twirled his wand in frustration. The dark-robed man paled.

"It is v-v-very d-d-difficult to c-contact him," he nearly cried. "As he d-does not l-live p-p-precisely on the planet." Harry felt his eyebrows rise.

"You are saying...?" he began unbelievably.

"Y-Yes, master." He calmed down as Harry smiled wickedly.

"This is very good, Wormtail," he commented. "You've done well."

"Th-thank you, m-m-master." He sighed.

"Find a way to contact him. Let him know, we are interested in alliances." Voldemort ordered. "Dismissed." Wormtail strenuously walked out of the room, glad not to have been tortured. Voldemort went back to whirling his wand, a feeling of happiness and contentment working its way through his body.

Some thousand miles away, Harry's scar seared across his forehead and he woke up with a painful scream.

A/N: Revised chapter. So don't sue me....

## Chapter Two: The Triumphant Return to Grimmauld Place

Harry grabbed his forehead and cried out in pain. He had a vision, or rather, he was in Voldemort's mind again. The man didn't seem to notice he was there, but then again, he did lead Harry and company into that trap. Rubbing the raised mark, Harry's head pounded in agony. He needed to write the Order or against his better judgment, Dumbledore. But first he needed the thumping in his head to cease. Moving off the bed was a task in itself, as he felt slightly dizzy, and the room did not want to stop shaking. The wizard noticed the sky had gotten somewhat darker, but it was still afternoon. Stumbling across the room to the door, Harry fumbled with the knob and crashed into the bathroom. His scar still ached, and he had never felt this horrible after a vision.

He opened the faucet and slurped the cool water greedily, and ran a cool, wet hand over his lightning-shaped disfigurement. The pain dulled a bit, and the room wasn't shaking anymore. Raising himself up slowly, the boy left the bathroom and headed back to his room.

He pulled some parchment from his desk and his quills and ink. The Gryffindor knew what to write, but to who? As long as the Order received the note, he didn't care.

Hey,

I took a nap and had a vision. I don't think you'd want me to write it in full detail and send it, so I can only tell you when a trusted member arrives whenever. You can tell Dumbledore, as I know he is constantly busy at the moment.

Harry

Harry folded the note, not bothering to look it over, and cursed perceptibly.

"Where's a bloody owl when you need one?" he muttered angrily. He needed to get this letter off at this very moment. Voldemort was looking for some weapon or another, and from what Wormtail said, the person with the information didn't seem to live on Earth. Could it have been an alien or something?

Five minutes passed, and still no owl. The sky was a dull azure, cloudless with the sun burning everything in its path. He needed to contact the Order. If this was worthy of their investigation, they needed to know. It had been a while since he'd had a vision, as his summer was relatively visionless. He couldn't apparate, or portkey anywhere, and the Dursleys weren't hooked through the Floo network. He didn't think the Order would appreciate him bursting through the door, fresh from the Knight Bus. Sirius would love to know, but then again, how would he contact him? Grunting in annoyance, Harry spotted his reflection in the mirror on the wardrobe door. He looked thin and pale, he felt clammy, and his hair was messier than usual. He needed to reach someone, fast. But—oh...

The wizard lunged for his trunk and threw it open. Flinging clothes and books aside he dug deep in his trunk until he saw the edges of a brown package.

"Of course!" he exclaimed to the dust bunnies rolling across the floor. He pulled out the package and ripped it open. The mirror Sirius had given him fell on top of a faded blue t-shirt. Pulling it close to his face, Harry smiled. Why didn't he think of it before? "Sirius!" he spoke into the mirror. "Sirius Black!" Minutes later, a face appeared in the mirror, looking more gaunt and scruffy than usual. His godfather smiled at him happily.

"Harry! Was wondering when you'd finally use the mirror," he admitted. "How have you been?"

"Sirius, I just had a vision!" he ignored his comments. Sirius became grave. He glanced around before him and pulled the mirror closer. Harry could make out his intense blue eyes.

"Have you tried contacting the Order?" he whispered.

"I have a letter, but I have no owl to deliver it," he confessed. "I was hoping you'd let them know." Sirius frowned.

"I'll try, but I'm not exactly near the Order as of now," he revealed. "I'm nowhere near headquarters." Harry furrowed his brows.

"Where are you, then?" he asked. Sirius shook his head.

"Can't say, Harry. I'm working for the headmaster." He divulged. Harry wracked his brain for a possible way to deliver the message.

"Well, is there someone with you who can apparate to your house and let them know?" he desperately wanted someone in London to at least know of his vision, insignificant as it may be.

"I'll send Tonks, then." He spoke. "Meanwhile, wait for an owl to come get your letter." Harry heard the front door below him slam. "How've you been otherwise? Thought you'd use the mirror, since you've been telling everyone how boring your summer's been." Harry flushed in embarrassment.

"Guess I didn't use my common sense," he confessed. "At least Dumbledore let you out this year." Sirius nodded, and glanced up at something in front of him.

"Here's Tonks. Call on me later, Harry. I've got some work to do." He suggested.

"All right. Goodbye, Sirius."

"Bye, Harry." And he vanished. Harry sighed and placed the mirror on his nightstand. Groaning as he looked around his room, he bent over the floor to shove everything back in his trunk. Next time, he'd think before he acted, since it gets him in so much hot water.

ooooo

Luckily, Hedwig arrived before dinner that night, refreshed and happy to be home, but was disappointed when Harry informed her she would be sending another letter to Grimmauld Place. She carried no letter from Hermione or the Order back, and he felt a bit glum.

He hadn't received any notices from his friends since his vision, a few weeks ago. No one from the Order came to hear his story, and he surmised they didn't really want to bother, since no one was in any immediate danger. A bit of the bitter anger from last year wrapped around his emotions as he thought of his friends. He wondered if they were now at Grimmauld Place, forced to keep everything secret, forbidden to give him any information.

And if Dumbledore was still in charge (which he assumed), he was sure the old headmaster forbade his friends from informing him.

He tried to contact Sirius several times, but only darkness swirled where his face should have been. He didn't feel odd, or sense anything wrong, so nothing horrible could have happened.

As a result of a boredom panic, one warm afternoon, he took his schoolbooks and homework over to Mrs. Figg's house and finished his summer essays there. He carefully plucked Mr. Tibbles' orange hairs off of his drying potions essay, finally glad to have over three feet of the work done. But after he finished the essay, he wondered why he even completed it, since he may not have gotten in Snape's N.E.W.T. Potions course. He hadn't received his O.W.L.s yet, and frankly, doing all that work for what was probably nothing left him feeling cranky for wasting time.

He irritably rolled his parchments up and bade Mrs. Figg good night, heading back in the direction of Privet Drive. Due to his sour mood, he really didn't feel like having dinner with his irksome relatives; and he ate a good meal at Mrs. Figg's, so he couldn't see the point of eating another set of dry vegetables and picking meat off a bone. As soon as he shoved open the door, his uncle rounded on him.

"Where've you been, boy?" he demanded. "What've you been up to?" Harry, bad-tempered from his wasted afternoon, glowered at his uncle. The man's beetle-sized eyes flickered with something close to fear, but he puffed out his enormous chest and returned the hateful gaze. Petunia and Dudley emerged from the sitting room in sheer curiosity. Harry could see his aunt's horse-like neck poking from behind his cousin's pudgy body.

"I don't think it's any business of yours," Harry drawled in aggravation. Vernon tapered his small eyes.

"As long as you're under my roof—"

"I've heard it before. Let it go, Dursley." He growled. This may not have been the right thing to say, but it did get a rise out of his uncle. His aunt gasped in shock.

"You treat your elders with respect boy!" he cried. Harry grinned widely.

"I will when I spot more grays on your head, Dursley." He raised his eyebrow in a challenging manner. Spit was beginning to pool at the edges of Vernon's jaw, and he breathed heavily. He reminded Harry of bull about to charge.

"How dare you speak to me in this way, boy!" he shouted, the glass on the nearby China cabinet rattling gently. Dudley snickered behind his father while his mother scowled.

"Give it to him, dad!" he urged, his piggy eyes alight with pleasure.

"I can speak freely, you know. Mind you, it is a right." Harry kept his tone low and demeaning, as if explaining things to a five-year-old. "I really don't have to tell you anything." Vernon wheezed deeply and glared daggers at his only nephew.

"Fine then. I'll lock the doors after Dudley gets home. Let's see you try and weasel out of that one." He chuckled beastly. Harry smirked.

"I'm sure Mad-Eye and my godfather would love to hear what you're threatening me with." He mocked. Vernon double-backed slightly before coming up with a solution.

"Not if your ruddy pigeon is locked in your room." He grinned acidly. Harry's smirk never faltered.

"I'll let you in on a little secret." He whispered, leaning toward his uncle carefully. Petunia and Dudley shifted closer to hear the secret. "They're watching me right now. And there are more of my kind in this neighborhood than you believe." Of course, there was only Mrs. Figg, and she was a Squib, which was useless. Lest he forget the supposed Order member guarding him. It took all of his control to refrain from rolling on the floor in laughter at the priceless looks on his relatives' face was worth the lies. They all wore similar looks of horror, disbelief and the utmost fear on their faces.

"You...you're lying," Dudley stammered. Petunia gripped his shoulder in alarm.

"You're sure?" Harry peeked in his direction. Harry must have had a truly devious glint in his eye by the way the three Dursleys flinched when his emerald eyes landed on each of them. He pushed past his

large uncle and cousin and made his way to the stairs. Tucking his books and essays under his arm, he slowly ascended the steps before he stopped halfway to turn and face his frightened relatives.

"Remember," he chorused in a singsong tone, "they're always watching." And he went the rest of the way to his room.

ooooo

Days following his act in the foyer of his home found the Dursleys a bit more compliant with Harry. They never questioned his whereabouts or demanded anything of him again, in fear of being harmed by the invisible wizards lurking around Privet Drive. The Dursleys suddenly became suspicious of their surrounding neighbors, and their paranoia spanned the others they came in contact with. Aunt Petunia screamed when Mrs. Number Seven rang the doorbell, cracking walnuts as she waited. Dudley could be seen poking various items of his with a thin, wispy stick, in fear of anything of his being bewitched; Vernon offered to weed his wife's garden during the weekend when she almost ordered Harry to do it one time. All in all, life was definitely more interesting now that the Dursleys were in fear of their lives.

It was a warm Friday evening when Vernon and Petunia Dursley decided to step away from the madness that was Number Four, Privet Drive, and have a personal night to themselves. Harry didn't want to dwell on whatever hidden meanings came from that phrase, so he sat on his bed in his room, a queer feeling churning within him. Dudley was downstairs watching television, of course; Harry was a bit surprised he had nowhere to go, seeing as how it was a clear Friday night. Vernon hesitantly entered Harry's room. It was much neater than it was a few weeks ago, as the boy had tidied it up and set things in order. He cleared his throat to alert the boy of his presence. Harry merely lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking of unnatural things ignoring the gnawing feeling in his abdomen. His uncle stood at the door for a few moments, shifting restlessly, waiting to be acknowledged.

"Go on." Harry prompted, not looking in his direction.

"Your aunt and I will be heading out."

"Hmm."

"For a night to ourselves."

"Sounds nice."

"Keep out of trouble."

"Too late." Vernon paused and eyed him suspiciously.

"No leaving the house for midnight wandering—"

"Wouldn't dream of leaving the palace."

"No television—"

"Of course."

"No telephone." He continued.

"No one I know uses one." He mused aloud.

"You've already eaten, there's no use in sneaking food."

"Growing toothpicks need nourishment." He protested weakly. His uncle glared at him and turned to leave. "Close the door on your way out, please?" Vernon snarled, but complied with his nephew's wishes, shutting the door forcefully. Hedwig hooted sleepily, and ruffled her feathers. Harry sat in the dark, staring at his ceiling, trying to form shapes from the grainy surface. He indolently made out a sailboat—which was odd—a phoenix (even odder), and finally, a wand. The television downstairs blared a detergent advertisement noisily, and he shut his eyes.

For the few minutes his eyes were shut, sleep didn't come, but he didn't feel like nodding off at this moment. It wasn't fear of a vision, or anything along those lines. But he knew he couldn't sleep because he was thinking. It was most likely the end of July; he wasn't paying attention at all. Things had gone by so unhurriedly; it was fast—which made no sense to him at all. The day felt like it would never end on July the second, and before he turned around, it was already July fifteenth. That was a few weeks ago. So his birthday should be right around the corner.



The warm distress within him was clawing for a way out.

"Hopefully my liver isn't turning on me, Hedwig." He spoke out loud. It couldn't have been an upset stomach, because dinner was surprisingly all right, tonight. It wasn't an empty feeling, so nothing major is happening. It wasn't his scar, so Voldemort was out. It was then Dudley's piercing scream alerted him to trouble. Leaping out of bed, Harry grabbed his wand from his nightstand as Hedwig fully woke up. The bright stars out illuminated her refulgent eyes tonight, and she hooted softly.

Harry was vaguely reminded about the events last year, when he thought burglars had broken into his house. But Dudley was here, and if a thief—or worse, a Death Eater—wormed their way into the house, he had to protect them. He heard muffled voices through his door and he slowly opened it. He cursed the hinges for squeaking slightly and approached the topmost stair. The voices were clearer now.

"Wasn't expecting this one to be home—"

"Leave him be, he's already scared as it is."

"His aunt and uncle probably decided to take him out..."

"Doubt it."

"It is his day, you know..." A sudden clatter of objects and a soft female voice cursing brought a smile to Harry's face. He flew down the steps and ran into the living room. The smiling faces of Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Ron and Hermione made the young wizard ecstatic. Mad-Eye's crooked mouth formed a grin, and countless others in Harry's own personal guard stood behind them, including a few he didn't recognize.

"Harry!" Exclaimed Hermione. She ran for him and the Gryffindor soon found himself choking on bushy brown hair. "Oh, you're here! We were afraid your relatives took you out to celebrate." Ron grinned by her side, patting Harry on the back.

"Happy birthday, mate." He offered. Harry quirked his eyebrows.

"Birthday?" he asked. "My birthday?" The others gave him disbelieving looks.

"You don't even remember your own birthday, Harry? Watcher!" Tonks cried. Dudley trembled on the Dursley sofa, his hands hidden from view, masked by his lumpy rolls, firmly covering his bottom. His eyes never left the intruders. Lupin walked forward and ruffled Harry's untidy locks affectionately.

"Happy birthday, Harry."

"Um, thanks." He expressed uncertainly. The gnawing feeling had long left. He had been sixteen a full day and hadn't even noticed. Lupin motioned to the visitors.

"As you can see, more people earnestly requested to come rescue you for your birthday." He stated. A very rude and disturbing cough hacked through the silence. The crowd parted to reveal the worst birthday present Harry ever received.

Severus Snape scowled at every eye trained on him, his greasy locks framing his pallid face menacingly. Ron moved uneasily by Harry while a few Order members converged throughout the house, eying the living room contraptions this time around. Hermione seized Harry's upper arm and hopped on the balls of her feet.

"Well, not everyone wanted to come," Remus mumbled, shaking his head at Snape. Moody's magical eye was swiveling around the room, taking in each object.

"Where are your guardian Muggles?" he grunted. Eyeing Dudley carefully. The plump walrus jiggled nervously.

"Er, out." Harry answered. "All night." Ron looked at him oddly.

"They left you two alone?" he asked.

"They went to dinner." He regretted his answer. Hermione's smile lessened.

"And...they didn't...well, take you?" she questioned, her eyes shining, hoping for a valid explanation. Harry smiled anxiously.

"Um...no. They wanted, er...private dinner?" he replied. The others regarded him strangely. He could just imagine what they were thinking: who doesn't take the Boy-Who-Lived out on his birthday? Snape had an unreadable expression on his face; he quickly looked away and Harry detected a preoccupied glint before he scowled. Dudley's whimpers and babbling brought everyone's attention on him.

"You..." he motioned his head in an incline to Ron. "C-C-Candies..." Ron's eyes were thoughtful before he remembered the incident before the Quidditch World Cup, when Dudley's tongue resembled a long, pink python. "Y-You," he nodded to Hermione. "P-P-Picture..." she screwed up her face in reminiscing.

"Pardon me?" she asked.

"Oh, I was looking at my album." Harry admitted. "Must've remembered you." Hermione appeared somewhat flattered.

"Ready to pack your things, Harry?" Tonks queried, frightening Dudley further by changing her green hair black. He nodded absently.

"I just need to put a few things in my trunk." He raced up the stairs followed by Ron, Hermione and Tonks, who all seemed eager to assist him. "Sorry to disappoint you," he began when he opened the door. "I just need to pack a few items of clothing." He shoved a few shirts in his trunk as Hermione let Hedwig free with instructions to fly to Grimmauld Place. Tonks levitated the massive trunk and the four came down the steps. Members of the Order were now studying Dudley up closely. Harry never saw the boy quake as much as he did in the room full of trained wizards and witches. "How are we going then?" he asked Lupin. "By broomstick again?" Harry mentally imagined Snape on a broomstick. It was too unreal.

"No, boy." Mad-Eye barked, his magical eye still on Dudley. "By portkey."

"They're allowing them now?" he asked the retired Auror.

"Yes, Potter." Snape sneered, clearly uncomfortable in the Muggle house. "Or are you too noble to read the newspapers?" Harry sucked in a calming breath before answering. Snape was truly

grating on his nerves. Just by being on Privet Drive, he was a problem.

"Not the wizarding ones," Dudley squeaked at the mention of the word 'wizard.' "Oh, grow up, Big D." The large boy sent a weak glare in his cousin's direction. Lupin pulled a lengthy rope from his belt loop and unraveled it. Every person took a fist of rope and clung to it tightly. Harry took Hedwig's empty cage from Ron and held it with his other hand, while Tonks clutched his hovering trunk. The werewolf approached a shuddering Dudley and handed him an envelope.

"Make sure your parents get this note." He ordered. Dudley's countless chins vibrated as he nodded. Lupin genially pat the boy on the head and took hold of the rope. He took out a pocket watch and eyed it carefully. "Hold tight, then." A few seconds later, every wizard or witch standing in the living room felt a tug behind their navels and disappeared. Dudley's wide eyes surveyed the room cautiously before he lurched forward and fainted.

ooooo

Many thuds could be heard as a number of Order members, Harry, Ron and Hermione landed in the foyer of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Torches and candles dimly lit the corridor, as Harry beamed at his godfather's home. It looked much cleaner than before, and it was much quiet. The tapestry barring Mrs. Black from view still hung limply by the front door, closed from public scrutiny. Harry almost missed her screeching voice. Almost. His thoughts were disrupted as the Order members and Snape broke off and walked to the kitchen.

"I'll put your things upstairs," Tonks offered.

"Er, no!" Harry protested. He was dimly aware of how clumsy the young Auror was, and judging by the crash he heard tonight at Number Four, how she still is. She eyed him furtively. "I'll take it up. You've...well, you've done enough." He gave her a weak smile and seized his trunk handle, Ron carried the empty cage, and Hermione skipped off to the kitchen with Tonks. Climbing the steps, Harry almost ran into three ginger blurs ambling down the steps.

"All right there, Harry?" Fred halted mid-step and faced him with a grin.

"Dear old Ginger Bear didn't run you over, did she?" George added with an identical grin. Ginny scowled at her brothers, but smiled at Harry.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" she turned back and trotted up the stairs. To his utter surprise, the youngest Weasley embraced him and pecked him lightly on the cheek. Harry didn't doubt for a moment his face was rivaling the color of the Weasleys' hair. The young wizard was at a loss for words.

"Er, um...thanks, Ginny." He mumbled. Fred and George climbed back up the stairs ready to repeat their sister's actions, but Harry had whipped out his wand before they could reach him. "Don't even try it." With matching guffaws, the twins slapped Harry on his back and headed back down the steps.

"I swear," Ron shook his head in aversion. "She's keen on kissing every male that crosses her path." He assumed Ron was still bitter and protective over Ginny, what with her towering number of flings last year. Harry walked back up to his and Ron's rooms. "Lucky she didn't catch Snape yet."

"Lucky for who?" Harry uttered jokingly. They deposited his things in their room, swatted the jubilant Pig away from their heads and walked to the kitchen. The manor really hadn't changed much, save the foot-thick grime covering the walls was cleaned away, and all of the portraits had been removed.

Well, almost all.

Upon entering the kitchen, Harry was ambushed by a large figure, complete with colorful house robes and wavy burgundy hair. Mrs. Weasley immediately crushed Harry into a hug.

"Harry, dear!" she cooed. "So wonderful to see you! Oh, my, you've grown! But you're still so thin!" Harry was saved from Mrs. Weasley's carping by Mr. Weasley's firm handshake and one-armed hug.

"Harry, always a pleasure." He greeted. "Tell me: have the Muggles come up with anything interesting of late?" he whispered slyly, glancing at his wife over his shoulder every now and then.

"Er..." Harry didn't know what to say. "No, nothing that comes to mind." Mr. Weasley looked a bit disappointed before Harry added, "But I'll let you know as soon as they do." With a healthy, wholehearted pat on his back, Mr. Weasley beamed at the black-haired teenager.

"You do that, son." He smiled. "Thanks." Harry nodded, walked to the table. Hermione was enthusiastically chatting with Ginny and Tonks, who grew a long, bushy brown mane similar to Hermione's. Dinner was a normal affair, as everyone mainly ate and spoke about the day's events.

Harry trudged up the stairs after eating dessert with Ron and Hermione tailing him. She followed the boys into their room, and the candles flared to life. It was then Harry noticed his bed had many gifts and letters from his friends and other well-wishers. He thanked his friends for their gifts ("Books the 'round, then.") and changed into his pajamas. The traditional Hogwarts letter had come along with his gifts, but Harry didn't feel like reading another 'welcome back' notice. He'd open it when he needed to head out and buy his supplies. For now, the young wizard lay back into his fluffy pillows, a content rest beckoning to him.

A/N: Revised Chapter. Boring. Right. I'm a detailed-type person. These are the things I miss when I read some fanfics.

### Chapter Three: Old Dogs & New Tricks

The days following his birthday passed uneventfully for the Boy-Who-Lived, which he occupied with chess games and house cleaning with Mrs. Weasley. Unable to follow through on his promise, Ron began his summer essays when Hermione scolded him raw for not even reading on what they were about.

"How could you just—just laze about, when you know perfectly well you have work to do?" She raged. The three were sitting in the drawing room they had managed to de-doxify last summer. "How are you setting an example for the younger kids?" Ron's eyebrows flew up in his hairline, and he eyed the vacant area derisively.

"I don't see any younger kids 'round here. You, Harry?" he asked. Harry raised his hands in surrender.

"Leave me out of this." He informed. It was good to catch early on when an argument could be a long one. This qualified as one of those arguments. It was a fair, even exchange between the two as long as he wasn't dragged in to take sides. It was much better to be on good terms with both friends, rather than only one. Ron scowled at him and glowered at Hermione.

"I'm talking figuratively, of course." She explained.

"As always." He rolled his eyes. "I'd like to think I'd need to be among first years to actually set one."

"Think of Ginny. How do you think this influences her?"

"Ginny isn't in the room." Ron enlightened. "And I think you need to worry about Fred and George's influences, not mine. Who do you think taught her that infamous Bat-Bogey Hex?" Hermione wasn't deterred.

"You—are—a—prefect," she pointed out. Ron glowered at her lightly, before returning his attention to his comic.

"I'm officially off duty when summer kicks in." Ron turned the page of his wizard comic book. Harry refrained from letting Hermione know Ron was right, he didn't have to uphold the 'sanctity of prefectsim' as Fred and George (and Ginny) dubbed it. She shook her head still.

"A good prefect always practices their craft." She stated in an official manner. It sounded too much like McGonagall for Harry's taste.

"What's that? Rule number 3.0.1, clause four?" he questioned snidely.

"No, it's rule two, section eight, paragraph two." Hermione informed acerbically, through clenched teeth. Ron threw her a disbelieving look, topped with a hint of disgust.

"Probably the only one who memorized the darned book."

"And I doubt you've actually took the time to read it." She retorted. "If you had, then you'd have known."

"Mind you, they're a bunch of mindless common sense policies." He narrowed his eyes at a particular vibrant strip. "Crabbe and Goyle could have come up with them."

"Crabbe and Goyle have probably already done their essays." She snapped in exasperation. Ron blushed a bit behind his comic.

"Not if they can't read." He replied in a singsong tone. Hermione would have burned clear through the comic book with her glower. "I wish I could play Quidditch, now." Harry concurred silently. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"But you still have your essays to do." Ron freed an exhausted sigh.

"And I will do them."

"When? As the Hogwarts Express pulls up to Hogsmeade Station?" she taunted.

"I was thinking more like the morning of first classes," he scanned the Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. Hermione narrowed her eyes dangerously.

"You wouldn't."

"Okay, I wouldn't." he consented. A smile broke out on Hermione's face. Harry sighed. The argument seemed to be over. "But I'd still do



it on my own time." Electricity seemed to shoot out of the tips of Hermione's wild tresses.

"You're impossible!" she nearly shouted. Ron sat undaunted.

"Which is why you like me—why we're friends." He simply grinned. He didn't seem to notice the effect his words had on the bright witch. A small smile graced her lips and she blushed a brilliant shade of Weasley red.

"Just start on your essays. Saves you time if you do it while you're bored." She spoke softly. Ron glanced from his comic and set it down.

"For you, Hermione." He relented. "I'll begin one." As Ron left the room, Harry could see the bright tips of his ears matching his hair. Exhaling in relief, Harry got up to follow Ron. Hermione looked up from a large book she was reading concernedly.

"Something wrong?" she asked, her voice laced with worry. Harry shook it off.

"I was just going to get my essays. Maybe you could read them?" He responded. The witch gave him a suspicious look.

"You've done your essays?" she queried, a threatening tone of disbelief hanging in the air. Harry felt annoyed she would doubt him.

"Yes," he answered curtly. "I did them all." Beaming, she urged him on.

"Well done, Harry! Go get them!" he slowly left the drawing room and headed up the stairs. Ron was rummaging in his trunk for books and parchment when he entered.

"Need something?" he proposed. The redhead shook his shaggy mane.

"Got it, thanks." He declined. "What're you up to?"

"Hermione wants to check my essays." Harry answered, absently poking around his trunk for his summer work.

"You've already done? Do I need to worry about you growing bushy black hair, now?" he joked. The two headed back to the drawing room together, Ron working on his Transfiguration essay, Hermione correcting Harry's.

Days passed lethargically as well as Order members. There were three meetings in the last week, and they all seemed intense. Fred and George still hadn't been able to join the Order, but were promised membership in the near future. Their flesh-colored Extendable Ears were no use in breaking the Imperturbable Charm on the meeting room, so they could only guess what they were talking about. The most they heard was a raid in some museum in Greece none of them had heard about, and they'd gleaned that from listening on the landing.

Sirius hadn't been back, and Harry hadn't heard from him since he spoke to him through the two-way mirror, and he wasn't sure if he should be strongly worried or merely concerned. He was a grown wizard, and could handle himself quite well, but he was still labeled as a mad convict on the loose.

Kreacher, the depraved house elf, hadn't eased Harry's mind when he muttered his ill wishes for horrible fates befalling Sirius, in what he thought was under his breath. Harry didn't support Hermione's chiding of Ron when he called the senile elf a 'useless sack of wrinkles with a mouth,' and Ginny, in a fit of rage, proceeded to hurl him pell-mell across the room into a stuffy couch.

"Young Mistress does as Young Mistress pleases," he croaked, wobbling off the chair, his small bones creaking, but not before speaking in his loud and lucid 'undertone,' "oh, what would my Mistress think, blood traitor, Mudblood-lover girl thinking she's the new Mistress, oh, my Mistress will not be pleased..." and he tottered out of the room. Ginny held up a hand to silence Hermione's incoming excuses.

"He's a pest, Hermione," she hissed, her honey-brown eyes flashing gravely. "He nearly cost all of us our lives." Harry and Ron readily agreed.

"We should set it up so we accidentally chop off the nutter's head." Ron offered thoughtfully. "I expect he'd be real pleased his life goal was finally fulfilled." Hermione opened her mouth to say something,

but thought better of it, and resorted to glaring at the last and youngest male Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley had just yelled for everyone to come for dinner when the front door of Grimmauld Place slammed shut. Descending the staircases, the teens heard a soft female voice audibly curse as a loud crash was heard.

"Damn umbrella rack—" Tonks muttered, but the rest of her words were drowned out by a screeching wail. The curtains for Mrs. Black's portrait parted, and she began her tirade.

"BLOOD FILTH, SCUM! TAINTING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS, MUTANTS—" Lupin and Kingsley rushed from the kitchen to pull the drapes together. "SICK ABOMINATIONS, BEFOULING MY HOUSE, BE GONE!" The four teenagers carefully walked down the stairs after Kingsley and Remus forced the curtains shut. Harry shook his head.

"You'd think she'd realize by now we aren't going anywhere," Ginny mumbled and led the others to the kitchen.

"I strongly doubt it, Ginny." Remus answered tiredly. Harry had just remembered the moon would make an appearance in a few days. And with a small tinge of hope, he was eager to see his godfather, too.

Dinner was a usual affair, the adults chatting in low tones, the teenagers talking excitedly about what they'd do for the rest of the summer. Mrs. Weasley informed the others about taking them to Diagon Alley the last week in August, which they agreed to. It was only a few more weeks before they needed to purchase their supplies. After supper, the others headed up to their rooms, Hermione and Ginny following the boys to theirs. As soon as Ron opened the door, the lamps flared and illuminated an unfamiliar gray owl at the top of the armoire between Hedwig and the buzzing Pigwidgeon. It carried three letters in its beak, and swooped down to drop it on Ron's bed. Ron shifted to his drawer and fumbled for a few owl treats before tossing them to the owl. It hooted in thanks and flew off into the night. Ginny seized the letters and passed out two, one each to Ron and Hermione.

"Hogwarts letters," she answered Harry's curious look. "Books and things, I guess. I'll open it when we head to the Alley." She flopped down on Harry's bed as Hermione ripped into her correspondence. Her eyes flew across the words of a notice behind the standard letter, and she shrieked. Ron looked at her in shock. Her huge smile and celebratory dance scared the boys, but made Ginny giggle.

"I GOT ELEVEN O.W.L.S.! ELEVEN!" she cried, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Ron's eyes bulged in their sockets, and he tore open his envelope, flinging aside the usual missive, and scanning his records. His eyes didn't exactly light up as much as Hermione's, but he smiled nonetheless.

"Six," he stated, stuffing the card back in his shredded envelope. "Six O.W.L.s." An odd, strange glint of sadness flashed across his brown eyes before his smile brightened. Hermione jumped around him.

"Did you check yours, Harry? Have you checked?" she jabbered excitedly. Harry took his envelope from his bedside table and carefully opened it. He smiled at Ginny's glare as he took his time to rip the seal. His dinner suddenly seemed to transfigure itself into hundreds of butterflies fluttering in his belly. It made him feel more nauseous and anxious than ever.

"Well, hurry up, Harry! Look, the sun's already setting!" Ron teased. By the look in his eye, he was just as nervous as Harry. Suddenly, thoughts flitted through Harry's head. What if he didn't get enough O.W.L.s? What if he only got one good O.W.L. and was kicked out of Hogwarts? Or worse—what if he didn't get enough to be an Auror?

He ultimately pulled out the wan card with the ministry seal. He briefly glanced over his grades. The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a Muggle chainsaw.

"Well?" Hermione prodded. "Can we expect a future Auror?" She nervously shifted on the balls of her feet. There was an audible sigh in the small room when the wizard smiled.

"Seven O.W.L.s." Hermione and Ginny both squealed and the youngest Weasley joined in her dance. Ron maneuvered around the terrifying females and thumped Harry on the back genially.

"Good on you, mate!" he congratulated. "Looks like we're both having Potions together. Not too thrilled about that. Snape for another two years." Ron feigned retching and read over the rest of the classes. Harry's mind wandered to how he actually passed his Potions O.W.L., since he seemed to be worse than Neville. Not that extreme, but close. Snape would sure be startled to see him next month. The girls were still dancing and hopping around the room like rabbits.

CRACK!

Ron yelled and jumped behind Harry in fright. The twins laughed and eyed the dancing girls. With a brief glance at each other, they began their own dance.

"What are we dancing for?" Asked George, hopping from foot to foot.

"Yeah. Kreacher suffocate under Mrs. Black's bloomers?" Fred added, with his own spastic moves. At this, Hermione quit skipping to look fiercely at the twins. George shook his head.

"Guess not then." He and Fred quit their boogie. "No need to celebrate, now." Ron grinned widely.

"Got our O.W.L.s." he enlightened. "I got six." If he thought this would impress his older brothers, he was sorely mistaken.

"Following in Percy's footsteps already." George declared mock-sullenly. "And at such a young age, too."

"Wait, why aren't you two at work?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione dear," Fred imitated his mother. "We have hired help at the moment. I think we deserve a day off from our spectacular pranking."

"A true prankster never takes a day off," informed Ginny knowingly. George beamed proudly and pat her head.

"We've taught you well, young Weasley." He feigned sadness. "If only Ron would've listened. He could have been saved by our words of wisdom."

"Oh, shut up," the youngest male Weasley glared. "Let's go tell mum." As the others followed him out (Fred and George still keeping their conversation on what Ron could have been), Harry thought his feeling of euphoria couldn't be dimmed. He was one step closer to gaining his ideal career.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting in the drawing room the next night, the boys playing a passionate game of chess, and Hermione, of course, reading. Just as Ron's queen checked his king, there was a harsh crash coming from the entrance. The three whipped around and faced the drawing room door, hands steadily on their wands. A many loud barks were heard, as Mrs. Black began her diatribe once more. Harry heard Kingsley and Moody struggling to push the drapes to conceal her, and the odd barking was still resounding through the house. Then it clicked.

"Hang on..." Harry began, squinting his eyes, as if trying to see something. "I know that bark." He shot out of the room, Hermione and Ron hot on his heels. Running down the steps, Harry smiled at the sight of the straggly, familiar, long black hair of his godfather.

"We really need to get that old bat off the wall," he told both Moody and Kingsley. The teenagers beamed at the innocent convict.

"Sirius," Harry trotted the rest of the way down the steps. "You're back." Sirius turned around with a smile, but quickly frowned at his godson's content tone.

"So good to know I've been missed." He raised an eyebrow before ruffling his godson's askew hair. "Ron, Hermione." He nodded to each of them in turn.

"I've tried contacting you, but you were out of reach, I guess." Harry said.

"Important work. Sorry I couldn't chat, Harry." He apologized, walking to the kitchen. "You all eaten all ready? Haven't had a decent meal in weeks." He stated absently.

"Probably still stew in the kitchen." Ron pointed out. "Mum's made tons." Sirius nodded his head.

"As long as there aren't any raw meats in them. I've had my fill of rats, frogs and deer." He intoned seriously. Hermione made a noise of disgust in the back of her throat before shaking it off.

"No, beef, I think. Maybe roast." Ron recited. "Not sure. It tasted kind of weird. Mum wasn't paying much attention. Maybe Kreacher dropped some extra seasonings in it." Hermione shot him a scornful look.

"You sure he didn't fall in the pot?" Sirius added, with disappointment, picking at his nails. "Pity. Would've loved to have gotten rid of him." Hermione opened her mouth to—what Harry believed was—plead with the last remaining Black to set the vicious house-elf free, but Harry stomped generously on her foot and shook his head. She didn't look at him for the rest of the journey to the kitchen.

Ron and Hermione grabbed bowls and utensils for Sirius while Harry got a glass and the pitcher of butterbeer out. Sirius sat himself at the long table and glanced without purpose around his childhood kitchen.

"Wish I could say I missed this place," he drawled stonily. "Hard to, after everything it's done to you." Hermione and Ron shared a look before handing him his stew. Harry plunked a flagon of drink before him, and serving him the rest of the bread loaf from dinner. The gaunt man tore into the meal unceremoniously, greedily lapping at the soup, true to his Animagus form. Hermione's nose flared in astonishment, and Ron actually appeared disturbed. Harry nervously sat across from Sirius, and the others—somewhat hesitantly—followed.

"Got our O.W.L. results," he began limply. He wasn't sure if his godfather was paying attention, but from the inconspicuous bob of his head he went on. "Got seven. Ron got six, and Hermione, eleven." Sirius' face re-emerged from his bowl and he grinned toothily at the three.

"Congratulations. Your folks must be proud, Ron. As are yours, Hermione." He wiped his face on his sleeve. "I'm proud of you, Harry. Reckon your parents'd of been thrilled." Harry nodded hollowly at the thought of his parents.

"Yeah..." The silence ensuing was only permeated by Sirius' beastly slurps and satisfied chuckles. Hermione fidgeted with the end of her skirt, while Ron studied the burn marks on the tables.

"So," Sirius belched with a huge grin. "Anymore for seconds?"

Harry surveyed the dusty room with a disappointed huff. Long, ashen fingers gripped the edge of the wooden throne in anger. The healthy fire in the filthy hearth burned high, its flames licking the mantle over it. His hands were lit with a vibrant orange shadow, crackling like the roaring fire.

The full moon cast an eerie glow about the objects in the room not illuminated by fire, its blue luminosity highlighting the grimy chairs and table in the center. He'd been in this room before. And he was excited then. But now...now, he was livid. The insolent peon had yet to present himself with his report. He'd been waiting for weeks for this report. And he'd better have one.

Somehow, Harry knew if all went as planned, he would have an unlimited amount of power behind him. Wielding evil would be but a flick of a wand, or something as simple as a one-word command. After tonight, domination would prove much easier. No longer would he scrounge for followers or chase after minute objects. The past was a ways behind him, and the future, a mere arm's length. He'd risen to power, all right; but after this midnight hour's account, he would be power.

Shuffling and muffled words were heard from behind sandy oak doors, and the brass handle had clicked. A stout figure tumbled into the room, uneasily adjusting his dark robes, blacker than the soul within him. Harry unobtrusively shook his head in disgust. Why he put up with the bumbling fool after all these years, he could not fathom. Perhaps it was because he was his second (or third) most faithful servant, returning to restore him after all these lingering years.

Or maybe it was his shifty character, changing like the magical chameleon with every backdrop. He had more disguises than the average spy, flitting about as if he'd been faithful the entire time.

Was it his uneasiness, overflowing with the zeal to please his master? Or was it greed, his puny mind assuming once he attained



unutterable full power, he'd finally be rewarded. Harry's throaty, malevolent chuckle escaped his throat. Wasn't his silver hand enough repayment?

The round man stumbled on the shabby Oriental rug. His wincing could easily be heard above the roar of the fire, and his telltale trembling only served to seal his fretfulness. He bowed before Harry, took the hem of his black robes in his shaky hands, and planted an extolling kiss on it.

"M-Master..." his wobbly, high voice spoke. Harry sighed in annoyance.

"Hold your stammering tongue, Wormtail. On your feet." He barked in irritation. "You had better have good news for me. Wormtail's eyes swelled to the size of saucers. Thoughts rushed through his mind like a thousand rodents, and Harry broke his icy eye contact with him. "Have you located the weapons?" Wormtail glanced to the fire, the window, the filthy floor and back to Harry in swift succession.

"N-No, master..." he whispered. Harry's red eyes widened in anger. He grasped his dark wand and aimed it at Wormtail.

"Failure!" he shouted, his voice high and cold. "You have been given weeks!"

"M-Master..."

"Do you think I run on a lax program?" he demanded. "Crucio!" The large man was on the floor, writhing in agony, his pitiful cries piercing the stillness of the room. Harry ended the curse and scowled.

"Rise, you sniveling catastrophe." He menaced. "Explain yourself."

"M-M-Master," Wormtail's stuttering was noticeably worse. "We've c-c-connected with your ac-acquaintance...h-he has n-n-not been able to l-locate the weapons. B-But he h-h-has a g-g-general idea of where they m-may b-be." This intrigued the irate Harry.

"And?"

"W-We have r-r-raided one of th-the museums, m-my lord," he continued. "And f-found nothing. His evilness s-sends y-you his c-c-condolences.... And as a g-gift, off-offers you an—an alliance." With these words, Harry's lips twitched into a smile.

"An alliance, you say?" he tapped his white, bony index finger to his serpentine bottom lip.

"Y-Yes..." Wormtail quivered in his place. "He awaits y-y-your w-word, m-my lord." It was one thing to see the Dark Lord livid, but to see him happy, was just...unnerving. With a feral chuckle evading his throat, Harry looked piercingly at Wormtail through Voldemort's eyes.

"Return to him at once, Wormtail." He ordered with a grin. "I readily accept his offer." The shivering Death Eater released a tiny sigh of relief before nodding. "Ah, yes.... the wizarding world is but a stone's throw from my authority." With a wild, high laugh sending polar shivers down Peter Pettigrew's back, the room dissolved in a swirl of color.

And miles away, Harry Potter sat bolt upright in his bed and yelped at the pain shooting through his scar.

A/N: Finally, a good cliffie. At least I think. What do you think? No idea how the whole O.W.L. thing works. I just gave them a point for each class they got an 'O' or an 'E' in. R & R, let me now! BTW, Happy Birthday, Chris! My number...er, yeah, a fan.... lol.

## Chapter Four: Encounters, Part One

"Whuzzat?" Ron grumbled sleepily, jerking out of bed. Harry painfully rubbed his scar with one hand, his throbbing head with the other. "Arry? That you?" Ron yawned. The Weasley blinked before looking at his best friend, cast in moonlight, stroking his scar. "Jeez!" He shot out of his cot and landed beside Harry on his bed. "What's up? Is it You-Know-Who?" he asked. The black-haired teenager nodded shortly, feeling Ron's comforting hand on his shoulder.

"He's...he's really happy." He explained uncertainly. "Something good's happened." Ron visibly paled, even in the blue moonlight striking both males. Hedwig hooted dolefully from her place on the wardrobe, while Pigwidgeon gave a quiet hoot and settled back to rest.

"I'll get Sirius." Ron bolted out of the room, shooting up the dark hallway. The cursed lightning bolt burned horribly, due to the fact Voldemort had tortured someone. Harry didn't feel the curse full on, but he had just realized his limbs were tingling. Swinging his legs over the side of his bed, Harry tried to stand, but fell back onto his bed. He was a bit weak kneed, and the pain coursing through his brain didn't help in the least. The young wizard heard muffled noises and creaking floorboards in the corridor before the blurry form of Ron came back, with fuzzy Hermione, Sirius, Molly, and Arthur on his tail.

"Ask for one person and the bloody house shows up," he griped. Harry gave him a feeble chuckle before Sirius and Molly rushed to his side. Hedwig screeched angrily, ruffling her feathers and burying her face under her wings. The Azkaban escapee caressed Harry's face concernedly.

"Are you all right? Any pain? What's wrong?" he shot question after question.

"Dear, does your head hurt? Your scar? Anything else? Feeling nauseous?" Mrs. Weasley added, checking his eyes. Harry reached for his glasses while Sirius helped push it along the bridge of his nose. Harry noted they were all still fully dressed in day clothes. It had to be 2:00 AM in the morning.

"My head does hurt," he admitted. "And my scar...but we've got to tell Dumbledore! Voldemort—" everyone but Sirius flinched. "Is planning something huge, and he was with Peter, and they—"

"Perhaps we should adjourn to a more suitable room," a new voice suggested. Hedwig and Pig both hooted in accord. Everyone whipped their heads around to face the wizened figure in the door, robes wide and cheerful. Hermione let out a small squeak and jumped aside to let the headmaster through. He entered, his thick robes trailing behind the ancient man, power radiating gently within the small chamber. With a wrinkled smile (to which Harry narrowed his eyes a bit) he approached Harry, placing an old hand on his shoulder. "Come, Harry, to the drawing room." One gentle squeeze, and Albus Dumbledore turned to leave the room.

Sirius and Molly rose alongside Harry, and Arthur walked after Dumbledore. Hermione and Ron gave Harry sympathetic looks, and made to follow the headmaster.

"And where are you two going?" Molly's sharp voice sliced through the air. "Back to bed with you two." Dumbledore halted mid-step.

"Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley are allowed to come, since Harry will unquestionably inform them of his vision at any rate." His soft voice returned. Molly looked like she wanted to protest, but thought better of it, and sealed her lips. Dumbledore smiled lightly, and continued down the steps. Sirius faced his godson.

"Think you can make it without help?" he asked. Harry felt the tingling leave his limbs, and the smarting in his skull dulled quite a bit, leaving a massive headache.

"Yeah." He stood up, and to his relief, didn't slump back to his bed. He pushed open his trunk and fished for socks, finally grabbing a pair of black ones. Yanking them on, Harry quickly left the room and descended the stairs to follow the headmaster, Ron, Hermione, Sirius and a somewhat disapproving Mrs. Weasley in his wake.

As the five entered the drawing room, Harry was disappointed to have additional company. Snape was standing beside a desk, eying his surroundings with distaste; McGonagall sat in the armchair opposite Dumbledore, who had an impassive expression plastered across his face. Mad-Eye Moody clunked across the room, taking a

swill from his hip flask, his magical eye seemingly calm at the moment. Mr. Weasley was whispering in jovial, but deep tones to a man the teenagers hadn't recognized. He had jet-black hair, which was short and well kept; his eyes were an entrancing midnight blue, alight with kindness; his face, chiseled and well defined, his mandibular joints very prominent, with a medium, sharp nose.

The stranger had a warm ambience that seemed to mesh well with everyone present, including Snape. He wore an indigo cloak, but Harry could see an ash gray Muggle business suit poking out from under it. With a short greeting to Sirius and Molly (and a gracious farewell), the unfamiliar guest strode over to Snape and they began a light conversation. After what seemed like an hour, Dumbledore finally acknowledged Harry.

"Harry, please have a seat." He motioned to the couch. "And Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley." Ron and Hermione were quick to take their places on either side of Harry, before Mrs. Weasley could attempt an objection. Snape folded his arms and glared while the visitor threw the three a convivial grin. It was a few more minutes before Dumbledore decided to speak (considering the teenagers were glancing at the suspicious man), focusing their attention on the mystery guest. "This is Spiridon Smythe." he introduced. The dark-haired man gave a small wave and nodded at some silent agreement. Dumbledore didn't reveal anything more about Spiridon, but Harry felt as if the man could be trusted for now. "You had a vision tonight, correct, Harry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you like to tell us what you saw?"

"Uh..." he racked his memory for important tidbits. "Voldemort was waiting for Wormtail." Everyone but Sirius, Dumbledore, and surprisingly, Spiridon, flinched at the Dark Wizard's name. Ron gave a sort of inconspicuous fit, while Hermione subdued a squeak. He glanced cautiously at Spiridon. Harry decided not to say the rat's true name, since he probably may not have believed the story. Then again, he and Sirius seemed to be decent friends. Spiridon alleviated Harry's qualms with a response.

"Peter Pettigrew, foul, adulterous..." he growled, but corrected his behavior quickly. "Sorry to interrupt." Harry nodded his forgiveness and went on.

"Peter was late, and Voldemort...he seemed—I don't know, kind of...well, anxious about something." He continued uncertainly. "All that changed, and he got mad because Peter failed. He—he cast the Cruciatus Curse on him, and made him explain why he failed." Dumbledore stroked his beard pensively, and Mad-Eye took to pacing before the hearth. "He'd said that they'd gone to the person they needed information from, and the person most likely knew where it was, but not exactly."

"What?" Dumbledore inquired.

"He's looking for a weapon, or weapons, sir," Harry rubbed his scar. "The Death Eaters, they raided a museum or something. Couldn't find anything." Snape raised an eyebrow and McGonagall's eyes widened a bit.

"He probably flew off his hinges," Sirius added scathingly. Spiridon nodded.

"Knowing Voldemort, yes." He agreed. Harry raised his eyebrows at the man's use of the most feared wizard's name, but hid it quickly.

"Actually, he was slightly upset. He got...he got better news," he spoke slowly. Everyone sat up a bit more in their seats—Mad-Eye halted his pacing—and set their eyes on Harry.

"What news?" Dumbledore advised, clearly wanting to know more.

"From what I infer, he's joining forces with someone. Someone powerful. An alliance, he says, which makes taking over the wizarding world less harder." He narrowed his eyes, a slight throb forming in his head.

"Myst—" Spiridon began to speak but Harry noted Snape cough loudly and elbow him gently in the abdomen. Slitting his eyes, Spiridon turned away from the potions master. "I can't imagine anyone forming an alliance with someone so...mistrustful." He glared at Snape, who smirked.

"Mistrustful men gain mistrustful partners," Moody snarled. "It only makes sense, eh, Dumbledore?"

"Right, Alastor." He concurred. "Was there anything else, Harry?" The wizard shook his head slightly.

"That was it." His vision was surprisingly straightforward, save the mysterious weapons and alliance the sorcerer was seeking. Molly cleared her throat.

"Well, if that's it Albus, then you'll allow these three to go to bed." She pushed, narrowing her eyes at the teens.

"Of course. Good night, Harry, Ronald, Hermione." Dumbledore wished sincerely. They returned the farewell. The headmaster turned to Spiridon Smythe, patiently waiting for the man to end his talk with the potions professor.

"Straight to your rooms, you three." Molly warned. Harry shot Spiridon a fleeting look, but the man was deep in conversation with Professor Snape. Exiting the room, the three walked in silence up the staircase, before Hermione bade them good night on the landing. Coming into their rooms, Harry shut the door behind him before climbing into bed. He set his glasses on the night table, and slipped under the covers. The throbbing in his head reduced to a muted ache, though the sharp pains of a headache were still present. He lay back into his pillow, staring at the blank ceiling. The invisible portrait of Phineas Nigellus snorted before soft snoozing was heard.

"So, what d'you think?" Ron asked in the darkness from his cot. What did he think, besides Voldemort's thoughts? He had blatantly left out the fact that he was in Voldemort's mind when he had the vision, like last time.

"Dunno," he answered flatly. "Reckon these weapons must be big. As this alliance." Ron hummed his agreement.

"Don't worry. We'll get him in the end." He yawned widely. "Always do." His voice was heavy with sleep. In the stillness of the dark, the curtains had been shifted to block out the moonlight. Harry could only hear one thing.

...For neither can live while the other survives...

With a deep sigh, Harry traced his scar with his fingers. The end...

"I sure hope so, Ron." He murmured. "I hope so." But Ron had long fallen asleep, his strident snores rudely awakening Hedwig from her rest.

Harry woke up groggily the next morning, took a shower and trudged down the steps to breakfast. His headache was gone, and his sleep dreamless, but the vision lightly played in the far reaches of his mind. Ron wasn't in his bed, so he must've been in the kitchen. The boy wizard eyed the redhead talking with Hermione and his sister, Ginny, on one end of the table, while the adults occupied the other. This was particularly strange: Tonks, Sirius, Molly, Arthur, Bill, and Moody had somewhat ecstatic expressions on their faces, talking in excited, hushed tones, clearly not wanting the teenagers to overhear. Mystery guest Spiridon Smythe wasn't in sight, so he assumed he had gone back to wherever he had come from. Harry spared them an odd glance and flopped beside Ron.

"What's that, then?" he pulled a biscuit onto his dish, spooning some eggs and forking a few strips of bacon. Hermione and Ron shrugged. Ginny didn't seem to have heard his question, since her face was slack and tired.

"Something big, though." Hermione mumbled. Harry nodded and munched on his breakfast. The three sat in silence with Ginny, who was swirling her eggs around her plate resignedly. Ron constantly stared at his sister, but said nothing. Hermione looked at Ginny, squinted hard, as if studying her, then turned back to her breakfast. With a quiet yawn, the youngest Weasley turned to her brother.

"So, mum decide to get you anything 'cause of your O.W.L.s?" she asked. Ron shook his head.

"I've already decided. I don't want anything." He muttered, flushing somewhat. Hermione's eyes widened, and she looked at him in incredulity.

"You? Not want anything? That's a first." She teased. Ron answered her with a soft glare. "Well, why don't you want anything?"



"What's it to you?" he defended lightly. The adults were still talking avidly on their subject, ignoring the teenagers.

"Well, you get a good O.W.L. score, your mum wants to buy you something, and you refuse? Obviously something is wrong." She summarized.

"You don't need to know everything, Hermione. Just let this go." His tone was a warning one, and his ears reddened. The Muggle-born was visibly taken aback.

"Ron, I'm just a bit worried. You're sad, when you should be celebrating. Your parents are proud that their youngest son got good O.W.L.s." She pressed on. Harry looked between the two, now beginning a glare or stare contest. Ginny faced her own salver, not looking at any of them. "I'm your friend, doesn't that mean anything?" Ron scoffed, standing up quickly from his bench, and stepping over it.

"You're not family, so it means nothing." He huffed angrily and stomped out of the room. Hermione's eyes glistened, as she gaped at Ron's retreating back. The adult wizards and witches were still talking in low, thrilled, tones. Ginny flushed slightly, nonetheless, and spoke directly to her mushy plate.

"Know when to leave it alone, Hermione." She scolded. "Just...leave it be." She, too, stood and quietly departed after her brother. Hermione wiped at her eyes furiously, and pushed her plate away. Harry gave the clever young witch a sympathetic smile. But he also wanted to know why Ron hadn't asked for anything. Of course, the male loved receiving gifts and getting acknowledged for things, but even this was strange. Harry dimly remembered Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were happy about Ron's scores, but even they looked a bit sad. They couldn't've been measuring their youngest son to Percy, who had received a good amount of O.W.L.s as well, could they? But then, why would Ron be sad: after all, he can't stand Percy. And Ginny; she seemed sad also. Were the Weasleys generally sad because Ron received good O.W.L.s? That made no sense whatsoever.

"I don't...what've I done wrong?" she asked, obviously on the brink. Harry placed a comforting hand on her arm.

"I honestly don't know." Harry responded. "I've never seen Ron so upset over something." This was not the right thing to say, as Hermione gazed at him, fresh tears gathering on the brim of her eyelids. "But he'll get over it, though. Always has. He'll come around, Hermione, don't worry." The Gryffindor witch's lips twitched into a tiny smile.

"Thank you, Harry." She dabbed her napkin to her eyes. The young wizard nodded and went back to his breakfast, mulling over his friend's outburst.

"To be quite honest," he began after sipping his citrus juice, "I don't think he was upset with you." Hermione gave him a blank look. "I think this is something beyond what we know. Something to do with his family, I can only assume, due to his last, er...less than friendly comment." Sirius scooted down the table toward the two. It seemed the adults had dispersed, and soon Mrs. Weasley, Mad-Eye, and Sirius were the only adults in the kitchen. One look at Hermione, and his wide beam fell to a frown.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" he asked, holding the young girl's gaze. Sniffing rapidly, Hermione gave him a reassuring grin.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it." She lied. At Sirius' doubtful look, Harry broke in.

"She's just upset she didn't pass Dumbledore in O.W.L.s." he fibbed. "Wondering how he got thirteen, and all." The gaunt man smiled and thumped Hermione on the back.

"Dumbledore is the cleverest wizard, Hermione." He stated the obvious. "But you, are the cleverest witch." With a gentle pat, Sirius went back to the animated adults left, Mad-Eye's magical eye dancing gleefully in its loose socket.

Harry hadn't seen Ron in their room, or Ginny, so he went to the drawing room by himself. The adults had scattered themselves around the house: Sirius had gone to assist Remus, since his transformation had taken place the night prior; Mrs. Weasley was dusting the uninhabitable places of the house, dragging Hermione with her; Mad-Eye Moody was snooping around the Black Family cellar, mumbling about various locations to hold a secret meeting. So, Harry was left to his own devices. He wasn't up to playing any

games by his lonesome, and practicing on his broomstick was out of the question. Since his ban from Quidditch by the acting headmistress Umbridge, he hadn't received his precious Firebolt back. He sulked for a few moments wondering if his broom was still chained to the wall of her former office, or worse: in the hands of someone like Filch or even Snape. But since Snape wasn't his head of house, McGonagall must have had it. He made a mental note to ask her next time he encountered her.

Reading didn't seem like a good idea, since all of the books on the drawing room shelves belonged in a place more secure and classified than the Restricted Section. There were so many tomes on the forbidden arts; Harry thought he'd walked into a Dark Arts bookstore in Knockturn Alley. Of course, Mrs. Weasley forbade any of them to even touch the books, and requested to get rid of them, but Mad-Eye pointed out they may be useful in thwarting the enemy. Harry had been sitting down, staring and thinking for a while, before the door slammed open.

A peeved, dusty, and sour-faced Hermione trudged in, and crashed unceremoniously in the free seat beside Harry. The young wizard fought back a smile and studied the fireplace before them. Just last night, Mad-Eye was pacing before the hearth, and Ron and Hermione sat on either side of him while he told Dumbledore and his professors and others his latest vision. And then there was the mysterious guest, standing beside Snape, and saying the Dark Lord's name. Hermione huffed and brushed off a fair amount of dust from her jeans.

"I swear, this house just gets dirtier by the minute," she complained roughly. "Didn't we just dust it last year? All the money and power the ancient and most noble house of Black has and they couldn't even charm Anti-Grime spells on the entire house?" Harry covered his mouth hastily to stifle his laughs. He had never seen Hermione so angry with such a trivial matter. Then again, there was S.P.E.W....

"I take it only you and Mrs. Weasley had a rough time," he commented dumbly. She glared at the Boy-Who-Lived.

"You're one to talk. Didn't even bother to help us." She snarled. Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Neither did Ron or Ginny." Hermione furrowed her brows.

"I thought they were with you." She stated. Harry shook his head.

"Dunno where they're off to." He confessed, absently rubbing his forehead. "Seemed upset."

"Is your scar still hurting?" she immediately went into mother-mode.

"No. Just thinking about the vision." He replied.

"Oh. What do you think he's looking for now?" She asked, flicking a clump of lint off of her pants.

"Weapons, that's for sure." He responded. "He sent Wormtail to look for them in my first vision." Hermione's face scrunched in bafflement.

"How many visions did you have last night?"

"Only one. But I had one a few weeks ago, too." He answered. "In the first one, he sent Pettigrew out to find the weapons and gain an alliance. But...Wormtail, he said the weapons might not even...be in...this world. The wizarding world." The witch watched him in concentration.

"Not among the wizarding world, then where could they be? Wizards haven't really established anything in other fields of culture as Muggles have," she lectured curiously.

"What other worlds could there be, besides magical and non-magical?" Harry pursued.

"Well, there are magical and non-magical creatures, and myths and legends, but we can't be too sure." Hermione glanced at the bookshelves empty. "Do you remember anything else from your visions?" Harry thought hard for a moment. Voldemort was looking for weapons. He couldn't remember what kind, but knew he had heard of them.

"I don't know. Whom do you think this alliance could be with?" he asked. "Another powerful wizard?" The Gryffindor witch shrugged.

"Perhaps. But if the alliance was made with the person who could find the weapons, and the weapons aren't found among the wizards

or witches, could the person be from a different world? Or is it even a person?" Hermione inquired, more to herself than to Harry. The young man shuddered a bit. He couldn't dream of someone else from another world, other than the two he was familiar with. And was this 'someone' even a person?

"Could Voldemort's ally be an animal of some sort?"

"Anyone who supports Voldemort is an animal," Hermione joked dryly. "But as for who or what, I can't tell." The two sat in a contemplative silence for a while, wondering who or what the newest partner of Voldemort could resemble. It was then the door to the drawing was quietly opened, and a somewhat uneasy Ron stepped in and viewed the two. He gave them a weak smile and entered the room, leaving the door open behind him.

"Harry, Hermione." He acknowledged. The two nodded, Hermione stiffly, and she didn't quite meet his eyes as he stared at them. Shuffling over to his best friends, Ron flopped into the armchair Dumbledore occupied a number of hours ago and stared at his fading jeans. "I—" he cut himself off abruptly, studying the blackened wood in the hearth. "I just to let you two know I'm sorry, especially you Hermione. I shouldn't have been so snarky with you. It wasn't your fault." His face burned red with embarrassment and he went back to eying his pants. Hermione gave him a small smile.

"I'm sorry I goaded you in the kitchen. It wasn't my place. You're right." She apologized. Ron seemed to be struggling with something to say, before he took a deep breath and raised his eyes to meet his friends'.

"It's just that—" He was brusquely interrupted when the front door slammed and Mrs. Black's shouts filled the house.

"Oh, not again!" someone downstairs moaned. "I'm really sorry about this." It was Tonks. Figures. Ron breathed a sigh of relief, happy that his impending confession was halted.

"It's quite all right." A new voice sounded. Loud footsteps could be heard, as well as heavy grunting and curses.

"Blasted rope!" Sirius growled. "Blasted woman!" Mrs. Black cried and rained ill damnation over their heads, before the teenagers

glanced at each other and quietly slunk toward the door to hear better.

"May I?" the newcomer's voice shouted over the yells of the demented portrait. Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron with an odd expression.

"May he what? Burn the portrait to the seventh dimension of hell? Gladly!" Ron whispered sarcastically. Hermione shook her head while Harry grinned.

"You can try," Tonks yelled over the painting's screeches. "But it's a lost cause." The adults didn't speak after a few minutes, the devious artwork still shrieking.

"FILTHY BLOOD, STORMING THE HOUSE OF MY FOREFATHERS, MAKE HASTE!" she warned. "AND YOU! ABOMINATION OF MY FLESH!" she obviously turned her tirade on her only son. "BLOOD TRAITOR, DISLOYAL HEIR—" and for the first time, the teenagers heard silence.

"Bloody..." Tonks cursed, awe and wonder lacing her voice. "How'd you manage that?" A feminine, low, but calm voice spoke next, and the teenagers were shocked to behold it.

"You," Mrs. Black's calm voice spoke, no hint of malice or anger. "You're one of them. Of the highest rankings—one of them in my house! Why associate yourself with common filth?" Ron had a vacant expression on his face, while Hermione looked between the two boys.

"Who's she talking to? And so calmly?" he muttered under his breath. Hermione shook her head and Harry didn't answer. The three heard the hangings around the painting being shut hastily and a loud slap on clothed flesh.

"I've never...she's never..." Tonks stammered. "How?" A voice chuckled.

"You've just got to have the right touch," he spoke. Tonks giggled.

"We need you 'round here more often."

"Sorry you couldn't have come on a more pleasant welcome," Sirius spoke to the male guest. "What brings you back here?"

"Well, Sirius, I'm on my way to the school," he revealed. "To let Albus and the others know about them."

"The weapons?" Sirius spoke urgently. "You know where they are?" Harry's eyes widened and he shifted closer to the door, Hermione and Ron leaning on him from behind.

"Yes. They're in the safest hands possible. Or rather, necks." The guest admitted. His deep voice sounded oddly familiar. Harry lowered his brows.

"So Voldemort—" Tonks let out a small squeak at the name.

"Will never be able to get to them." He assured the two. There was silence.

"I suppose you won't be able to tell us where—"

"Only Albus will know." The man interrupted. "And if he decides to tell you, Sirius, it's up to him." Sirius agreed with the guest.

"I guess we can be content for now, knowing we're in possession of the weapons," Sirius added thoughtfully. "But for how long will they be safe, Spiridon? Will we be safe?" Hermione gasped audibly, and Ron clamped his hand over his mouth. Luckily, the adults didn't hear her.

"That, I don't know. But for now, let us just take this one issue at a time." He replied. The three continued to talk, and the snooping Gryffindors in the drawing room silently shut the door and settled back on the couch. The three teenagers appeared white faced and speechless, until they heard the muffled sound of the front door closing.

"So..." Ron began uneasily. "The weapons You-Know-Who are after...we have them?" Harry glanced at him.

"It would seem so," Hermione spoke in a low tone. "Our side has it."

"But how long before Voldemort finds out we have it and wages a battle?" Harry pointed out. "And how did we get them so fast? I mean, I only had the vision last night." Ron shrugged, and Hermione scratched her chin meditatively.

"Perhaps Dumbledore knew about these weapons and had someone looking for them," she suggested. "Or since Snape is the spy for the Order, maybe he told Dumbledore V-Voldemort was seeking them." Ron crumpled his face in reflection.

"What is Spiridon, anyway? I've never heard dad talk about him at work, so he couldn't work for the Ministry." He ruled out.

"Well, maybe he's just gotten a job there, or transferred. Your dad wouldn't tell you everything, Ron." Hermione chided.

"Mind you, last night they were pretty chummy, Hermione," he countered. "Dad's only chums with people the family knows. And—newsflash—we don't know him." The Gryffindor girl narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, to bite back a retort.

"And he's good friends with Sirius." Harry put in. "I'll bet he was on that mission Sirius was on earlier."

"And Snape." Hermione included. "They were talking to each other most of the time." Ron's face brightened and he jumped out of his chair.

"Aha!" he exclaimed.

"Shush!" Hermione scolded. "Keep it down!" The Weasley blushed and sat back down.

"It just came to me: he and Snape are good friends. Maybe he's also a Death Eater." He indicated. Hermione shook her head.

"Ron—"

"They're so close, so maybe Spiridon's also turned spy, or maybe he's higher up in ranks than Snape." He continued.

"Ron..."



"Or maybe, he and Snape are double agents, waiting for the chance to strike and betray us to You-Know-Who—"

"RON!" Hermione hissed. He looked at her strangely. "How many times must I tell you—Snape is loyal."

"Right." He mumbled disbelievingly.

"Ron may be right, Hermione." Harry declared. Hermione glared and Ron's face lit up. "About the Death Eater thing." Hermione frowned, but nodded slowly.

"We have to consider all possibilities," she stated calmly.

"Right." Agreed Ron with a brilliant smile.

"No matter how farfetched they might be." She added in an undertone.

"Sirius?" Harry began at dinner that night. He and his godfather sat with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Tonks and a pale, and weakened Remus at one end of the scrubbed dinner table. Sirius' teeth ripped into dinner roll.

"Yesh, Har'y?" he spoke, his mouth full of bread.

"I was...well, I was wondering." He swirled his stew disinterestedly. Remus and Sirius eyed the black-haired Gryffindor warily.

"About?"

"About...er," he rethought his words after Hermione swiftly kicked him under the table. "About what you all are up to." Sirius' spoon clattered loudly.

"Harry, you know you're not an Order member—" he lectured in a warning tone.

"I know, but all the adults seem especially happy about something. Especially this morning." Sirius paled at his godson's words.

"What about this morning?" Remus asked slightly threateningly.

"Well, the adults seemed pretty happy about something at the breakfast table earlier. Did it have to do with us? You all kept pretty silent." He declared curiously, before going slightly pallid. "There isn't another Triwizard Tournament, is there?" Sirius' bark of laughter and Remus' wide smile made the tense teenagers relax. "Glad that's out, then."

"So, what's going on?" Ron chimed in. "You have to admit, we aren't that thick." Hermione rolled her eyes and Ginny giggled into her serving. Molly Weasley, who was sitting between Ron and an excitable Arthur, rounded on her son.

"You'll do well not to be nosing in the business of others, Ronald." She cautioned. "You'll know soon enough." She faced the other adults she had been conversing with animatedly. Ron scowled, and turned back to his soup.

"That's exactly what everyone said about that tournament, they did. And look what turned out." He murmured, propping his head up with one dejected hand.

"Rest assured," soothed Remus. "It isn't the tournament. Though the events then and now don't seem to be too dissimilar." He sipped his stew while Harry narrowed his eyes at him.

"Well, sir, if they aren't too dissimilar, why keep the same oath of secrecy and privacy?" Hermione interjected. "Why not tell us if there's nothing to hide?"

"I'll bet Malfoy knows," Harry spoke sourly. "He knew about the tournament months in advance." Harry chewed whatever noodle he had spooned and swallowed it bitterly.

"Well, Lucius Malfoy is a mini Lavender Brown or Parvati Patil," Ginny divulged condescendingly. "He can't keep his mouth shut." Harry, Ron, and Sirius snorted into their dinner, while Lupin shook his head with a smile.

"Actually, we'd have thought you all would already have known, if you'd just observe keenly. The clues are right under your noses." Tonks added, changing her hair to a mixed shade of lengthy white, blue, orange and violet locks, colored into four sections. Remus

glared lightly at the young Auror, but she was too absorbed in her soup.

"What are you on about?" Ginny asked, observing the Auror's colorful hair with slight interest. Sirius just shook his head.

"I expect you all would know soon enough. Very soon, in fact." He stated furtively. Remus nodded.

"You all are going to Diagon Alley tomorrow, correct?" he asked them.

"Yes," Hermione answered, a clipped tone in her voice.

"You'd do well to have your book lists and things prepared for tomorrow." He suggested. Since their conversation seemed meaningless, Harry decided to risk it.

"So, what was your mission about, Sirius?" he started nonchalantly.

"Nice try, Harry." Sirius scolded gently. "I expect you'll find out in due time, as it affects you four. But you will find—out—when—that—time—comes." Harry sighed roughly. This was as effective as talking to a flobberwom. They were getting nowhere.

"All will be answered very soon," Remus ended. "We'll come to that subject when we get to it. Tonks, will you be going to the Alley...?"

"Back to your dinners, you four." Molly commanded the teenagers. They nodded solemnly before revisiting their rapidly cooling soups.

Harry woke early in the morning around eight, and slipped out of bed. Ron was still snoring in the next cot, mumbling in his sleep about dancing elves in tea cozies. The Boy-Who-Lived stretched and took a quick shower, before changing into a cable-knit maroon sweater and jeans, throwing on his trainers. Ron was still snoozing softly as Harry grabbed his Hogwarts letter from his trunk, pulled out his O.W.L. results (and storing them in an old Transfiguration book), and stuffed his letter in his pocket. He'd find out what books he needed when they arrived at that particular store. Grabbing his hoodless/armless Gryffindor cloak, the young wizard made sure his wand was in his free pocket and left his best friend to his peculiar dreams.

The only ones awake in Number 12 Grimmauld Place at such an 'early' hour was Mrs. Weasley, Mad-Eye Moody, and Remus Lupin. Mrs. Weasley had started making breakfast, a disapproving expression adorning her face, while Mad-Eye was discussing something with Lupin. Harry didn't want to bother them, so he sat beside a dirty pile of rags at the far end of the table. The enticing scent of bacon, eggs, biscuits and sausages filled the air, and Harry sighed contentedly. As the bench shifted a bit, Harry noted the pile grunt and move. Harry flinched slightly before sighing.

"Mundungus." He whispered to himself. Said pile of rags grumbled again before glancing up. Watery, bloodshot eyes met Harry's amused green ones, and a less than sober smile crinkled onto the wizard's lips. He shifted his ginger hair out of his eyes.

"Oi, 'arry." He greeted. "Been 'ere awhile, 'ave you?" Harry simply smiled.

"Just got here." Mundungus nodded absently, fumbling in his pockets. Harry assumed it was for the pipe he was forbidden to smoke.

"Ah see," he stated, before halting his roaming hands and looked at the Gryffindor curiously. "'Ere as in 'jus' arrived in th' house 'ere, or 'ere as in jus' to th' breakfas' table 'ere?" He gauged his expression as if his life depended on the answer.

"Er, second one." Harry answered.

"Oh." He replied, continuing his search before halting again. "Which 'un is 'at?" Harry shook his head and heard Mrs. Weasley's stifled groan. Obviously, she still hadn't approved of having the smuggling wizard in the house, but Harry assumed she didn't really have a choice. Mundungus found his pipe and pulled out his wand. He lit the grimy black pipe and the familiar green smoke appeared. Harry heard Moody's magical eye whirl from down the table, no doubt watching the bungling wizard carefully. "Been 'way, long time, really." Mundungus began, a soothing tone lacing his voice. "Haven't seen Figg. Seen Figgy, of the late, 'arry?" Harry opened his mouth to respond, but Mrs. Weasley cut him off.

"Mundungus, I've warned you about smoking!" she screeched angrily. The wizard was quick to put out his pipe and stow it away, but the delicious smell of eggs and bacon now mingled with the smoke making the kitchen reek something akin to dragon dung. A rumbling of shoes made the others turn to the entrance, and they watched as a sleepy Ron, Ginny, and Tonks, followed by a surprisingly chipper Hermione enter the kitchen. One whiff of the stench seeping through the kitchen walls, and Ron was fully awake, his face turning a bit green.

"I think I'll just have toast and water for breakfast, mum." He suggested nervously. Ginny pinched her nose shut and breathed through her mouth, while Hermione gracefully wafted the smell away. Mrs. Weasley glared at Mundungus, pointing a wooden spoon at the man.

"Thank Mundungus' smoke for ruining your appetites." She seethed. Tonks grinned lazily.

"I don't know, I thought Hippogriff droppings were a balanced part of breakfast." She kidded. Ron, who was munching on a piece of bacon he nicked while his mother's back was turned, suddenly stopped chewing and turned olive.

"Thanks, Tonks. I wasn't eating." He sneered sarcastically. The Auror and Ginny merely giggled, while Hermione took her place beside Harry.

After breakfast, Mrs. Weasley, a black, spiky-haired Tonks, Remus, and the newly arrived Mr. Weasley assembled in the drawing room with the four teenagers. Sirius had sprinted into the room with Mad-Eye clunking behind, and smiled longingly at the teenagers.

"Keep a careful eye out," Moody growled, his eye swiveling in all directions. "Keep your wands close by, and at the first sign of trouble..."

"Hex them good?" Ginny finished jokingly. Mad-Eye's crooked mouth formed a lopsided smile.

"Then you'll be dead before you can utter a second curse," he supplied grimly.

"What a nice way to bid us goodbye, Mad-Eye." Tonks commented derisively.

"Just be careful, you never know who could be lurking in Diagon Alley these days." his lips twitched a bit as if he wanted to smile, but he kept his expression grave.

"Everyone have your lists?" Arthur checked. Harry nodded, but the others gasped. Molly shook her head in dismay as the three shot out of the room and up the steps.

"What they've got their minds on, I've no idea," Molly spoke reproachfully. "Of course, Harry's more on task than they." She smiled and tapped Harry tenderly on the nose before adjusting his cloak. Sirius placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezing it gently. Moments later, the teens came back down the steps, though none missed their excited looks and Ron's awed expression. Sirius and Remus glanced at each other knowingly, and the other adults shared similar looks. Harry, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Hermione's bright brown eyes and contagious beam flashed in his directions.

"We just got it, of course!" she exclaimed, looking around at the others. Ron was at a loss for words, as was Ginny. "And you didn't even tell us anything, Harry!" she reprimanded the boy wizard.

"Got what?" Harry questioned. "What didn't I tell you?" She rolled her eyes.

"I've just—"

"Come along now, dears. Plenty of things to purchase, and not much time." Molly directed. Tonks and Remus quickly Flooed, followed by Ginny, a grinning Ron, and Hermione, all of which whose smiles hadn't faded in the least. Harry turned to his godfather.

"Sirius, what—?"

"You'll find out soon, Harry. Be careful." Harry sighed in frustration, grabbed a fistful of Floo powder and jumped into the hearth. The Gryffindor threw the powder down in an annoyed gesture, warm emerald flames licking around his ears and tickling his face.

"The Leaky Cauldron!" he shouted. In a blur of fire, he was gone.  
A/N: Revised chapter.

## Chapter Five: The Forging of Worlds, Part Two

Harry tumbled out of the fireplace and into two sets of strong arms. Opening his eyes to the spinning room, Harry smiled dazedly at his saviors, Mr. Weasley and Remus Lupin. The young wizard flushed in embarrassment.

"All right, there, Harry?" Arthur asked, setting the boy on his feet. Harry nodded slowly, trying to focus on the room, hoping the spinning would end. The two men released their grip on Harry, and the young man brushed some soot off of his robes.

"Here, let me." Tonks pointed her wand at Harry, muttered a spell, and immediately all dirt and grunge on his robes disappeared. He muttered a thanks to the Auror, then focused on the bar before him. He brushed his fringe quickly over his scar, remembering all too well how the customers of the Leaky Cauldron always seem to scan the foreheads of every male entering the pub—by various means—and make him uncomfortable with their exaltations.

Harry never viewed himself—in any way—as a hero.

The place was as dimly lit as always, and Tom, the innkeeper and barkeeper, polished a few goblets with a clean rag. A frail witch sat in the corner, carefully turning the page in the latest issue of *Witch Weekly*, while a small toddler bounced around the table with humiliated parents. Many wizards had drinks (some smoking and others, non-smoking), and a few middle-aged witches sat in the center of the bar talking and pointing around the bar. And that's when Harry noticed it.

The bar seemed more full than normal, and had far more people than usual. A young girl about Ginny's age or younger, sat with an orange cloak at a nearby table, talking furiously to what seemed to be her stony-faced parents. Another strange family sat broodingly in a corner, their tall son's violet robes shimmering ominously in the dimly lit bar. Harry turned to talk to Hermione when Remus pulled him along toward the back, where the Alley was accessible.

"Come along, Harry." He whispered, smiling at the others in the bar. He dropped the Gryffindor's arm and Harry followed anxiously, shooting glances over his shoulder at the bar, which seemed to admit more students and their families every time he blinked.



Entering the walled courtyard, Harry huddled closely behind his three companions, neither of which having lost their grins.

"Can't wait," Hermione babbled excitedly. "Really, this only happens once in a lifetime. Best educational opportunity ever." Ginny nodded enthusiastically, her straight hair bobbing and shining in the clouded sunlight.

"Oh, how exciting!" she squealed. "Never thought this would happen! Always taught they were myths, but mum and dad told us they were friends with them! Never believed them, though. Silly me!" Ron grinned dazedly.

"Wow, can you believe it, though? A full year. Amazing." He stated in admiration. Harry cocked his head to the side, raising his eyebrows. Who were they talking about? What were they talking about?

"What—" he was disrupted by Mr. Weasley's rhythmic tapping of the bricks. The bricks shifted and turned, warped and moving about, finally becoming the archway into Diagon Alley.

"All right, Diagon Alley, everyone! First stop, Gringotts!" he announced. Mrs. Weasley ushered the children out of the courtyard and onto the cobblestone street, where Harry's eyes widened. The entire alley was filled with teenagers—his age, younger, and older—in the brightly colored cloaks, walking along with their parents. Many of them carried colorful bags, and things. He found it completely odd when a tall adolescent, who could easily have been a seventh year wearing a white cloak, carried a box with the Ollivander's logo on it. The boy looked at his wand in awe, wrapping his fingers around it and tucking and whipping it out of his waistband.

"Dad!" he called to a gangly, long brown-haired man. "I got it! I got my first wand!" His father thumped him on his back, whispered some words in his ear, and the two walked off. Mr. Ollivander made wands for first years, or most likely anyone who lost or broke their wand. For a strange student to walk around with a completely new wand and resemble a full-grown student was just weird.

"Harry? You keeping up?" Ginny called from in front of him. Harry shook out of his stupor and followed the redhead to the tall white building ahead. The Gryffindor wizard couldn't satiate his curiosity

for the oddly dressed students as he glanced around the packed shopping area. Dual newsstands were set up in front of every third shop, and Harry noticed Hermione pay for two newspapers.

Two?

He glanced at the moving pictures on the familiar Daily Prophet. It was of Minister Fudge, giving a speech on their progress in apprehending Death Eaters. He heard Ginny tutting in front of him with distaste. Behind him, Tonks mumbled something and pushed him to follow Ginny. The crowds around them were large, but oddly, they weren't shoving anyone. Harry glanced back at the front page of the Daily Prophet before turning his gaze to the second newspaper. Furrowing his brows, he ran ahead to Hermione, who was avidly reading the unfamiliar rag. The Olympic Herald, as it was named, displayed a moving photograph of a museum break-in aftermath.

"Er, Hermione?" he asked.

"Mm?" she answered distractedly, absorbed in the new paper.

"What are you reading?"

"The newspaper." Harry rolled his eyes.

"I've never seen that one before." He mused. "Is it new?" Hermione shook her head. A blue cloak-clad boy narrowly missed them and muttered an apology, before running off in some odd direction.

"Amazing," Ginny whispered glancing around. "They're everywhere." Harry narrowed his eyes in thought.

"Yeah, it's so hard to believe, you have no idea." Ron commented, glancing around himself. Harry's curiosity peaked.

"Is it me, or does Diagon Alley seem a bit more...well, jam-packed and crazy to you?" he asked in general. Hermione lowered the papers.

"Of course." She stated knowingly. "Didn't you read your Hogwarts letter?" The black-haired teen blushed.

"No." Hermione shook her head frowningly, revolving her brown eyes.

"Oh, Harry. You're hopeless." She confessed.

"Well, why?" Harry began a bit defensively. "What's going on?" Hermione sighed.

"Well, as you can see, the alley is crowded with strangely-cloaked individuals." She started in a boring tone.

"Tell me something I don't know." He retorted. She rolled her eyes again.

"Do have your Hogwarts letter?" she asked. Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and pulled out the crumpled envelope, waving it in the air. "Open it, then read it." She ordered.

"Why?"

"Because it'll explain everything to you." She forced. "Now read." Sighing in frustration, Harry took out his book list and pushed it in his pocket. Taking the usual summer notice, Harry lazily scanned over it, his eyes widening with every word. He read it a second and a third time. Hermione grinned lightly. "I honestly thought you already knew and just didn't want to mention it."

Dear Mr. Potter,

Due to indefinite sinister forces of these warring times, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will play host to a visiting school rerouted to ours.

Harry read the first sentence over and over again. 'Play host to a visiting school?' He read on.

Hogwarts School welcomes Aripedes Academy of Celestiality, a school located in southern Greece for young Celestials in training. True, students under Hogwarts instruction have been taught at the behest of the Ministry of Magic, that such a race does not exist, but in truth, Celestials do exist and live as normally as wizards and witches.

You, as a student representing Hogwarts School, have the opportunity to receive the students of the finest Greek school for young Celestials-in-training, and usher them into a comfortable adjustment. Students of Hogwarts will continue their training and education, along with the instruction of Aripedes Academy professors and students. You may learn more about the lives of young Beings and Entities in training, as well as form long, bonding relationships with them. All students are asked to grasp this opportunity to reconnect with the Celestial world positively, as they will be spending the better part of one full school year under the covering of Hogwarts School.

Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross station, platform nine and three-quarters, at ten o' clock. A list of books for next year is enclosed.

Yours sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress

Harry gaped. A full year? One school year? With Celestials?

He was taught in History of Magic that Celestials, or Olympic gods and goddesses, were merely myths. Beings and Entities, as they called themselves, were folk tales. Now...now, he was spending an entire school year with them. Huh. So this is what all the adults were excited about.

"Understand now, Harry?" Hermione asked, as they ascended the steps of Gringotts.

"That's why all the adults were beating around the subject. And telling us we'd know soon." He surmised. "They knew we were schooling with Celestials this year." The three nodded happily. Remus chuckled.

"Surprises are good, Harry. Sometimes." He confessed. "One of the oldest laws in the ministry is coming into effect this year." Hermione nodded happily.

"The school law hasn't been in effect for centuries." She added. "Now, for the first time in centuries, the schools are finally coming together again."

"Wizard and Celestial-kind are aligning themselves once more," Remus pointed out, guiding the others to the counter. Harry glanced around the bank, teeming with foreign individuals in colorful robes. Celestials. Hermione began to converse with a goblin and exchange her Muggle money.

"Wizards and Celestials were once the best of friends," Mr. Weasley added. "Always dependent on each other, fighting side by side...right up until the last war." At this, the adults turned somber.

"What happened?" Harry asked, genuinely inquisitive. Remus sighed.

"Well, they don't normally tell students the truth, as they labeled the Olympians myth, but..." Remus glanced around, eying the busy Celestials and wizards suspiciously. "I'll tell you when we get home." Tonks agreed. Three collective groans were heard as Remus squeezed Harry's shoulder.

"There's no telling what spies from the ministry there are." Tonks infused. Hermione agreed to stay with Tonks while the others visited their vaults. Harry was pleased to note the Weasley vault had a lot more gold than the last time he saw it. Mr. Weasley unloaded piles of Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts from the vault, no doubt thanks to Fred and George's booming joke shop. He took money from his vault for his books and supplies and they were on their way back to the surface, Remus appearing a bit green around the gills from the rickety cart ride.

As they stepped back into the marble lobby of Gringotts, Harry caught sight of someone exiting the bank. The person seemed familiar, he couldn't tell, as he hadn't caught their face, with neat black, wavy hair and a crushed velvet emerald robe. He accompanied three children with powder-blue satin robes, two of which were boys and the middle, a girl. An old man with a gray robe matching his gray hair walked alongside them, helping to carry some of their weighty load.

"Come on, Harry." Ginny called. "We're going to the book shop." Harry nodded absently, his eyes reluctant to abandon the Celestial family. He was pushed by Remus to accompany the others toward the infamous bookstore, Flourish & Blotts. Due to the overcapacity of wizards, witches and Celestials in the Alley, getting to the bookshop was a feat in itself. Harry narrowly missed a group of excitedly chatting white-cloaked teens, all with an odd animal over their left breast. He missed the writing underneath the symbol (thanks to Remus' jerking and gentle shoving), but from what he gleaned, the word seemed to be 'Voltaire.'

As he passed several more Celestial students and families on the cobblestone street of Diagon Alley, Harry's eye caught one of the shopping bags a stern-faced Being lugged. The bright blue bag read 'Persephone's Readings,' and there was a small silver emblem with an open book, with a fluffy quill against an open page, both of which were boxed in by an elaborate Celtic border. Harry had never heard of a store named so, and assumed it must be a new shop. As several well-known stores whisked by, he noticed more and more unfamiliar bags with equally unfamiliar names:

The Atlas Emporium. Hephaestus' Arsenal. Chimaera's Robes & Cloaks. Olympic Links. Force Workshop. Sliatyckx Central.

And he noticed none in Diagon Alley.

Finally, Hermione voiced his internal concerns to the crowd, thereby solving the enigma Harry had subconsciously created.

"These stores," she began, glancing at a passing blue-cloaked Entity with an Olympic Links bag. "They're not wizarding ones, are they?" Remus shook his head.

"They aren't, Hermione." He bowed his head benignly at a passing female Celestial with long brown hair. "They're from the Celestials' equivalent of Diagon Alley, Aristedes Square." Ginny and Ron nodded in thought, furrowing their brows a bit. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley continued to lead the group, Tonks off to their side and Remus bringing up the rear. Ron scratched his head, disrupting his red locks in a very Potter-like hairstyle.

"Do they have the same system of getting into their center, Flooing, brick-tapping and the like?" Ginny queried, falling in step beside

Remus. Hermione immediately piped up, shoving the papers under her arm.

"I don't think so. From the looks of it, most of them just received wands." She stated, studying the various cloaks carefully. Remus tiredly smiled and made way for a rushing witch.

"They have different means of travel than wizards, Ginny. And mostly adults have wands." He corrected. "Ah, here we are." The group approached Flourish & Blotts, only to enter the store and gape. Harry's emerald eyes ran over the scene of the normally busy bookstore and blinked a few times. The store was more overstuffed than Gilderoy Lockhart's autobiographical signing in his second year. He doubted he'd get free books this time.

That was, if they had any books left.

The shop was overflowing with wizards, witches, Beings and Entities, all rushing from shelf to shelf to get their books for school. Harry watched as a rather large family struggled with high stacks of books to get to the check out counter. From the looks of it, the massive group seemed a blur of light blue, orange, white and a single plain black cloak on the smallest brown-haired male. The parents, a frazzled Entity with bright auburn hair and a tall Being with a desperate expression on his pale, round face, weaved their many children through the crowds, ushering them to the counter. Hermione, Ron and Ginny, like Harry, seemed to be counting the number of pale, curly brown-haired offspring the two had, most likely coming up with similar conclusions.

The family could have easily been a Celestial version of the Weasleys. Tonks stifled a giggle, Remus grinned amiably, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley appeared sympathetic.

Though the children all had varying shades of brunette and lighter crimson hair, the ten children between the two adults sealed the pact. All of the 'Celestial Weasleys,' as Harry had dubbed them, hauled a heap of books, ten or so thick to the front, their parents rushing them along. Quite a few colorfully cloaked Beings and Entities trotted in and out of the store, with their alien sacks and purchased their things. Clearing his throat audibly (gaining a few baffled stares from the surrounding Celestials), Mr. Weasley told the children to gather their books and meet up with them once they've

gathered their requirements. Ginny and Tonks went to get the teenager's mandatory texts, Mrs. Weasley hurrying after them, grumbling worriedly about Tonks supervising her only daughter. Remus and Arthur took to walking around the store discussing private matters. Which left Hermione, Ron, and Harry to their own devices. The trio walked to the section dedicated to Transfiguration, in the very back of the store. Hermione pulled out three copies of N.E.W.T. Transfiguration, Volume One, and handed each of the boys one. A tall, African-looking boy with a powder blue robe smiled warmly at them, taking a copy for himself also, before walking toward his parents.

"Honestly, they're everywhere." Ron exclaimed quietly, while Hermione thumbed through the new book. "First, it's knocked into our brains every year that gods and goddesses doesn't exist—"

"Shh!" Hermione scolded crossly. Ron rolled his eyes and continued quietly. The three headed for the astronomy section next.

"And all of a sudden, in one day, we're expected to up and take it all in stride that we aren't the superior race anymore." He jostled the book in his arms. Hermione wrinkled her mouth and gave Ron a disbelieving look, which he didn't miss. With a weary sigh, he stared back at her. "What now, Hermione?"

"Well, we were never the superior race in the first place." She addressed firmly. "No one really knows, I suppose."

"It is kind of difficult to just take it all in, Hermione," Harry added. "Ron's right. Since we began school, all Binns has been droning in History of Magic is that such a race never lived." Ron looked aghast at his best friend.

"You actually pay attention in history? You're actually awake?" he questioned sarcastically. Hermione glared at the redhead, allowing what seemed to be a second year Hufflepuff to pass before them. Harry shook his head with a smile.

"He's only been forcefully repeating the lesson every year. Thought even you'd memorize it by now." she retorted. Ron raised an eyebrow at her disparagingly.



"Hmm." He huffed. "And I suppose dear old Crabbe and Goyle have learned it all by rote too, eh?" Harry hid his smiling countenance behind a high pile of astronomy books. Hermione glowered at the red-haired Weasley prefect, pursing her lips tightly in her most extreme imitation of McGonagall yet. Yanking out a few copies, he gave one to his best friends and settled in for a long afternoon. As they approached the Defense Against the Dark Arts section, Ron glanced at his inventory.

"What's this, then? Advanced Dark Arts Defense? A competent defense teacher this year?" Ron questioned scanning his book list. Hermione smiled, pulling out more N.E.W.T. Defense Against the Dark Arts study manuals.

"I would expect," she strained, attempting to carry the six heavy books she was set on buying. "After Crouch and Umbridge, they'd have to at least give us a sane, non-violent instructor." The clever Gryffindor struggled to balance the books before Ron, red faced and shifty-eyed, offered to carry some of the books for her. Hermione's cheeks reddened a bit, after which she mumbled a quiet thanks. Harry, however, was fingering the texts along their new spines across the shelf, before pulling out an interesting burgundy book. The leather cover was engraved in dull gold letters, with a stationary wand under the title. It was then his mind drifted to last year's Defense Association, or Dumbledore's Army, as they were known. The new defense professor seemed to know what they were doing, what with their required book, but even so, would he continue the organization, or disband? He absently ran his fingers over the title.

"Efficient Defense Against the Dark Arts: Charms, Jinxes, Hexes, and Great Duelers." Hermione read interestedly over his shoulder. "Harry, are you still considering running and continuing the Defense Association?" Her brown eyes were alight with a mixture of curiosity, excitement, and major interest in the messy-haired boy's answer. Harry opened his mouth to reply, but Ron joined them from his wandering.

"Why not?" he queried, disbelievingly. "It hasn't hurt us before; it did help us out in the...you know, Ministry..." he whispered the last part. Hermione nodded thoughtfully and Harry flushed at the mention of his ultimate flop. He pushed the book into his arms on top of his rising pile.

"Why should I?" he challenged his friends. "It only served to get us in trouble, and force the school into disarray." Hermione tutted while Ron rolled his eyes.

"And it upped everyone's vigilance from then on. You probably helped everyone pass their O.W.L.s." Ron pointed out, adjusting his and Hermione's books. "In case you didn't know, the threat of You-Know-Who is real." Harry threw him an obvious glare, and Hermione murmured something about saying Voldemort's name.

"Gee, Ron. Didn't know he was still around." He retorted caustically.

"Harry, because of you, people are taking his return seriously." Hermione added. He was quick to respond that people also died because of him, but he didn't have the heart to think of Cedric or his parents at the moment.

"And, not only are you helping us pass our examinations with a better chance, but you're also preparing us for danger, equipping us with the knowledge of useful defense spells and such." Ron put in. "You're giving us hope, Harry. Helping us gain the advantage in this war. And now that You-Know-Who—"

"Voldemort, Ron. His name is Voldemort." Hermione mumbled tiredly. Ron shuddered, throwing the girl a peeved glower before continuing.

"—Now that he's got this ally, well, if he comes after the school, we're its only hope besides the professors." Hermione nodded in understanding, and the three continued toward the Charms area.

"Ron's right, Harry. Our knowledge of spells can save and protect others. You have to continue the Defense Association." She ordered. Harry gave her an incredulous stare shaking his head.

"If not for the war, the seventh years've got N.E.W.T.s coming up. And the fifth years've got O.W.L.s. You can help them and us if this professor turns out to be a joke." Ron supplied, avoiding a collision with a short, violet-cloaked boy.

"We could use the extra practice." Hermione stated, nabbing a thick gray book off the shelf and adding it to her pile. Harry thought over all his friends' arguments about keeping Dumbledore's Army. He

had to admit, there was a satisfying feeling that churned within him as he stood before the eager and expectant eyes of his peers, teaching them methods in arming themselves and so on. Maybe—just maybe, he'd continue the group. If not for the war, then for the willing students of Hogwarts. For victory.

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After what seemed like hours waiting in the protracted line, the trio caught up with the Weasley parents and Remus, paying for their books and awaiting Ginny and Tonks. Mrs. Weasley had been reluctant to leave the fifth year with the clumsy Auror, but after reassurances from both sides, she reluctantly consented. Now, it seemed their reassurances were in vain.

"Where could they be? We've only been here forty-five minutes!" she screeched, scaring a few nearby blue-cloaked Celestials. Ron, Hermione and Harry shared wincing looks, while Remus and Arthur tried to calm the barmy redhead.

"Molly, they're fine. Ginny and Tonks must—"

"Don't you start, Arthur! She's our daughter! Our only daught—"

"I know, Molly." Mr. Weasley strangely seemed disturbed and angered by his wife's frantic cries. Harry was taken aback, as he'd always seen Mrs. Weasley fuming at her husband, never the other way around. Ron turned away from his arguing parents, his cheeks gaining color, but Harry caught the faraway glint in his eyes. Hermione concernedly glanced between the adults and the sixth year, but sealed her lips shut. Harry finally conceded, setting his books down beside Hermione and Ron's.

"I'll go find her. They can't be that far, can they?" He turned around and retraced his footsteps around the bookshop, offering a small smile to a passing family of orange-cloaked Beings and Entities. The Transfiguration and Defense sections were void of any familiar redheads. The Astronomy sect was clear of anyone, save for the older-looking white, satin-cloaked girl sitting on the floor underneath the shelf reading. He snickered to himself when he could still hear Mrs. Weasley's worried rambling from the purchasing counter. When he reached the Potions region, Harry grinned as he spotted the back of a proverbial long red mane of crimson hair, curls pooling below

her shoulders, in stark contrast to the black cloak she was wearing. The emerald-eyed boy advanced a few steps toward the girl before stopping at the sight of her companions.

One wore a black cloak, and she turned to face Harry with an odd, worn, gray-eyed look. Her long, pointed chin and large, sharp nose sniffed the air before turning back to the girl. The older woman's hair was in a tight ponytail at the top of her head. Her companion, standing on the other side of the ginger-haired girl, wore a navy robe, and had his long black hair tied in a neat leather thong at the base of his skull. He, too, spotted Harry, raised a thick, black eyebrow perched above his gray eyes, and angular face. His mouth was set in a slack frown, and his nose looked as if it had been broken a few times, very similar to Viktor Krum. He whispered something to the slate-eyed woman, and the two walked off with the girl. From his distance away, Harry surmised the girl to be around his or Ginny's age, but he couldn't remember seeing such a girl at Hogwarts. The odd group left to the next section, leaving the Boy-Who-Lived stunned in his place.

"Hiya, Harry!" the recognizable voice of Tonks called from behind him. Harry spun around to face the bright-eyed witch.

And Ginny right beside her with a massive grin.

He narrowed his eyes and looked back to where he spotted the foreign group, then back at the Weasley.

"What?" she asked. Harry shook his head to rid himself of his tricky mind.

"Nothing. I, er, thought you...were, um...never

mind." He gave up. "You mum's about ready to kill you both."

"Mm," Tonks responded. "Guess we took quite long, eh, Ginny?" The youngest Weasley nodded with a blush. A small group of purple cloak-clad Celestials emerged behind them, politely asking them to move aside. The three began to walk toward the shrieking voice of Mrs. Weasley.

"I reckon you should arrange my funeral now," she stated, somberly walking toward the check out counter. "Perhaps, I shouldn't even bother buying these books. No good to me when I'm gone..."

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Ginny made it safely back to Grimmauld Place, as did the rest of the group, but she wasn't without a good, stretched lecture from her mother. Mr. Weasley didn't bother to scold his daughter, as she was with an Order member and still in the store. Harry noticed he still seemed quite out of sorts with his wife, and headed to the kitchen by himself.

Sirius enthusiastically welcomed his godson and houseguests back, offering to carry Harry's things to his room. Harry steadily refused, and motioned for Sirius to help the laboring Hermione, who's newly purchased contents were close to toppling to the careworn floor. He and Ron trudged to their rooms with their items, neither uttering a word about their outlandish, yet stirring day. Entering their chambers, Ron stuffed his assets in his trunk individually, whilst Harry fought internally to find out what caused the normally happy Gryffindor keeper such silence and gloom. Fear of receiving an outburst similar to the one at breakfast made the Gryffindor bite his tongue, reexamining his words. A combination of terms could set the redhead off again, and Harry was careful to avoid that chance. Mustering the rest of his infamous Gryffindor House courage, Harry stuffed the last book in his trunk and turned to face Ron. He was kneeling beside his trunk on the floor, softly cursing while shoving books in his trunk.

"Oy, Ron?" the sixth year prefect glanced at his best friend in confusion. Harry hesitated, catching the cheerless brown eyes in their sockets. "Erm...what...about those Celestials today?" He heaved a sigh of relief when Ron smiled genuinely and reverently.

"Reckon they're okay. Glad to have them in our school, mate." He answered, forcing his trunk shut. "Wicked." Ron latched his trunk shut and stood heading for the door. Harry nodded in agreement, but mentally slapped himself. Okay, so he didn't have the guts to fight with his best friend right now over his current moods and feelings. But at least Ron was back to his old self. For now.

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Lunch was a lazy affair, the children talking about their encounters with the Celestials and their expectations for the coming year.

"D'you think they'll have a floating house or a ship like Beauxbatons or Durmstrang?" Ginny asked when the four were assembled in the drawing room. Hermione shut her book with a baffled expression.

"Don't know. Don't think so." She assumed. "Those were only handfuls of students, not an entire school." Ron bit the head off his Chocolate Frog and concurred.

"Un things fer sure," he garbled with his full mouth. "They can' stay in th' dorms. They're alrea'y full an' sma'." Hermione wrinkled her face in disgust, disagreeing.

"Hogwarts, A History, Ron. Read it. Learn it." She commanded acerbically. Naturally, he rolled his eyes.

"Oh, here we go...." He murmured, stuffing another frog in his mouth, and leaning farther into the couch.

"Hogwarts is enchanted in many ways. The dorms can expand to fit however many deemed by the headmaster, so you may very well be bunking with a hundred other boys." The Weasley choked on a Chocolate Frog he'd been wrestling with, forcing Harry to cuff him on the back.

"You mean, they could stay with us?" Harry asked, trying to picture a hundred other Beings crammed in his dorm, beds squeezed together, and four others hanging off the side of his bed in an agitated rest.

"Yes," she replied. "But then again, Dumbledore could magically add on a few wings to the castle, so they don't disrupt our normal lives." Ginny sighed in incongruity.

"I don't know, Hermione. I think I would rather them in our dorms. Think of all the late night chats we could have." She stared dreamily into the fireless hearth. Ron shook his head in aversion.

"Only you, Ginny." He remarked. His sister huffed and glared at him, crossing her arms.

"It'd be nice to actually have a sister, Ronald." She looked away from him; her icy look turned onto the moth-eaten rug. Ron's eyes flashed but he looked away from his sister without saying a word. Sensing the tension in the room, Hermione moved to lessen it.

"You know, Professor Lupin never did tell us how they travel. How will they get to the school?" Hermione queried, placing her book in her lap.

"I guess they aren't Flooing, seeing as how sending hundreds or thousands of students individually through fire will take hours." Harry commented, running over the details in the letter. "Our school letters didn't explain how they were arriving. So, maybe the train?" The young man ran his hands through his thick, black tresses, mentally scanning his letter. He jolted a bit, startling his friends. "The letter," he began. "It says we have to be at the station at ten. Why an hour earlier?"

"Ah, missed that part, then." Ron read over his Chocolate Frog card.

"I suppose Dumbledore wants us to greet the Celestials. They can get things—such as the sorting—done, without disrupting the welcome feast. Unless they take the Express with us. Don't know if we have to do anything, or if they'll be doing anything." Hermione relayed thoughtfully. Ginny cocked her eyebrow mockingly.

"Mind you, Hermione, I wouldn't fancy seeing the wizarding world's future dancing around in tea cozies and reenacting the separation of worlds. Bloody ridiculous, if you asked me." She mordantly snapped, examining her nails.

"Ginevra Weasley!" a familiar voice mock-screamed from the door. Fred and George entered with identical looks of amused contempt on their faces.

"Such language, young lady." Fred inanely scolded. "Where did you learn that from?" Ginny merely smirked and crossed her arms, pressing her back into the chair.

"You." She replied shortly. The boys grinned with pride.

"Ah, young Ginevra, we've taught you well." George feigned wiping a tear from his eye. "Oh, they grow so quickly...." Fred pat George on the back reassuringly while they entered the room and took the armchairs. Harry found himself staring at Ginny in surprise. No one noticed until Ginny herself narrowed her eyes and turned her irked attitude toward him.

"What?" His eyebrow rose as his lips slightly upturned.

"Ginevra?" he asked. She scowled.

"Of course, you were th...oh, that's right." She reminisced distantly. "You and Ron weren't at my sorting when you flew the car to school. Lot of good that did you two. Worshipped celebrities among the weeds, now." Ron frowned at her.

"Well, if that crazed house elf hadn't tried to do Harry in—"

"Dobby isn't crazed. He was just trying to save Harry's life." Hermione defended annoyingly. "You knew that, Ron." Fred, George, and Harry watched the exchange between the two. Ginny had taken Hermione's book and began reading it to block out her hostile surroundings.

"I don't mean crazed as in 'Kreacher-the-crazy-elf-who-won't-die' crazed, but—"

"Oh, won't you give him a chance? He's just misunderstood—"

"'Misunderstood?' Hermione, if we misunderstand him anymore, we all could be joining new ghosts in a newly-deceased counseling orientation."

"Why must you exaggerate things to a staggering level?"

"And why must you keep on defending the dead elf walking?"

"Leave him be, Ron!"

"Hermione, if we do, we're all dead, that's why I can't."

"Kreacher wouldn't do that..."



"Oh?" they seemed to have hit an uncomfortable stint in their conversation. "And I suppose he didn't lie to Harry and send us to our deaths in the Ministry, mm?" Hermione glanced around the room, refusing to meet Ron's accusing gaze. Harry uneasily shifted in his chair, scuffing his shoes on the frayed edges of carpet. Any mention of the Ministry made him remember how he had almost lost his friends, and remaining links to his dappled past. Hermione swallowed and played with the edge of her skirt uncertainly.

"Kreacher..."

"Is dangerous, Hermione." George finished, cutting his brother's incoming statement off. Fred, Ginny, and Harry agreed.

"The less he knows, the better." Ron pointed out before his brother cut him off again.

"But since he lives at headquarters, he will always know what's going on." Ginny added, idly turning the page. "Whether we want him to or not."

"Face it, bookworm," Fred teased lightly, receiving glares from both the bushy-haired female and his younger brother. "Sooner or later the elf's gonna have to kick the bucket."

"Bite the dust." George offered.

"Expire."

"Pass away."

"Meet his maker." Ginny suggested.

"Have his head hung on a plaque...." Harry submitted.

"Enough!" Hermione glowered at each of them, her hands in the air to stop any further comments on the hopeful death of the Black family servant. "He'll go when his time comes. Which could be years."

"Or months." Ron challenged.

"Weeks." Fred nodded grimly.

"I hope it's minutes." Ginny revealed, her eyes never leaving the page. She didn't quite catch the frosty glare given to her by Hermione. Harry merely smiled at the female Weasley, along with her brothers. If Hermione were close to making a comment about her last crude statement, it would have to wait. The drawing room suddenly filled with more people, as Sirius, Mad-Eye, Remus, and Tonks entered, all with satisfied, controlled expressions plastered on their faces. Fred & George glanced at them before smiling widely.

"What, what?"

"Did Kreacher breathe his last? Oh, Ginger Bear, you were right! How many Galleons did we bet again?" George joked, an artificial countenance of significance engraved in his features. Remus and the others shook their heads and smiled.

"Sorry, boys. He lives." Sirius answered disappointedly, grabbing a stiff-backed chair and placing it beside Harry. Hermione shut her eyes into slits and roughly crossed her arms. Ron rolled his eyes and gave Harry a 'when-will-she-get-over-the-bloody-beast' look. Mad-Eye and Remus grabbed extra chairs and sat them beside or before the children. Ginny closed Hermione's book reluctantly and slid it back to the Gryffindor sixth year. Harry eyed each of the adults before his gaze landed on Sirius. The gaunt escapee toyed with his tattered robe sleeves, smiling every so often at his godson. Harry cocked his brow.

"What, Sirius?" he asked. "Something the matter?" The Azkaban wonder-convict shook his head and heaved a grunt.

"No. Remus told us you all had some questions about your upcoming school year?" he rested his gaze on each of the remaining Hogwarts teens. His black mop shook, when he furrowed his eyebrows in thought.

"Maybe you should just start at the beginning, Remus." Moody offered in a growl. "That way it'd be easier for them to come up with their questions." Remus nodded with a sigh, and leaned back in his chair. He waited until the teenagers' full attentions were on him, wide-eyed and anxiously rocking forward to grasp his every word.

"The beginning..." he trailed wistfully. "I suppose that's a good place to start. You all, of course, learned from Binns, since you first set foot in Hogwarts, that only two worlds exist. The magical and the non-magical. The Muggle. Those of you with wizard ancestry have learned such, however strained the parents may seem to tell you this, or if not, you only knew of the existence of the Muggle world. Books upon books, commentary, and word-of-mouth pounded it into your brains when you were yea small, of the two human worlds. What they never told you, was the subsistence of another world, not so different from our own.

"Out of the myth and legend of Muggles came the protectors of mankind, the new race of power. Ancient Muggles believed them to be fables, but, oh no, the wizards of old knew them to be true. The Greeks and Romans called them gods and goddesses, proclaiming them to be their guardians. They worshipped them in every way, burning offerings, and sacrifice to their idols. But the Celestials, as the powerful individuals deemed themselves, wanted none of it. To protect such a vulnerable race was an honor all in itself, to them, and so was their task.

"Beings, the males were known, and Entities, as the females were called, did everything in their power to keep the world of humans alive. Most of the Celestials were good; however, evil has a way of slinking into the hearts of the lesser nobles. Celestials had one very important rule out of all others, appointed by their leader, Zeus, the Being of Thunder. They were to never interact in any physical manifestation to the Muggles, for fear of uproar. So they came to them in dreams, fancies, hallucinations, and signs, to guide them to their heart's intent. Zeus enforced this rule well, and dealt out necessary punishments to those who broke it. But every good and wonderful thing must turn one day. And the ultimate evil came to dominate both worlds.

"Celestials, naturally, have their world like wizards; their own animals, sub-species, and enemies. Prince Anton of Xenos was the ruler of the subspecies, the Blood Legion. They were the offspring of Celestial-animal hybrids, which turned evil. Anton was a corrupt Celestial banished from the kingdom of Olympus to Xenos, where he started anew and created his armies of hybrids. His terrible realm was of no threat to Olympus, and to show his bitterness to Zeus, he set his sights on the Muggles. All for a blind obsession. An infatuation, if you will.

"Now, he had originally been banished because he came to blows with a Muggle, and attempted to murder him. If it hadn't been for the high militia of the Celestials, he would have succeeded in revealing their world. After his kingdom was built, he began a war against the Muggles, who were of no match to the powers of Celestials. Thousands died at his hands. And more would suffer." Moody's eye swiveled to the door as sounds were heard from downstairs, but he nodded for Remus to continue. "The Celestials tried desperately to conceal their existence, but daily attacks on humans lessened their chances of success. Until they allied themselves." Hermione perked up and caught Remus' eye.

"The wizards. They joined forces." Remus nodded at the girl and rubbed his weather-beaten face.

"Celestials and wizards joined together to defeat Prince Anton. Celestials focused on his army, while the wizards' crafty memory charms came into place. Anton backed down, and a long, friendly alliance formed between both worlds. Wizards and Celestials had a great friendship, assisting each other in war or confrontation, confiding in each other. Laws in both governments were made to ensure our friendship in the protection of non-magic/non-Celestial humans and ourselves. Two age-old acquaintances. They were more than friends. We were family. Celestials invited wizards to their city in the sky, Olympus. Oh, the wonders of overlooking the clouds on Zeus' palace balcony and watching the Celestials pass by. And wizards, small and less extravagant though our world may be, invited Celestials to tea, picnics in the park....Birthday parties...." Remus glanced at Harry for a split second before looking at Sirius for even less time. "A family, indeed. Always there for each other. Through thick and thin. Not all endings are happy.

"Times were changing. Both worlds were on edge. Prince Anton reemerged more powerful and obsessed than ever. He hit the mortals twice as hard, but the races were able to thwart it. The wizarding world had its own evil rising, slithering around our realm and taking lives, gathering followers. And evil so horrid, we dared not to speak his name." Harry narrowed his eyes and glared unseeingly into the empty hearth.

"Voldemort." Hermione fidgeted a bit, while Ron and Ginny flinched. Fred and George stilled in their seats, and Tonks stifled a cry. Remus raised an eyebrow at Harry, but continued.

"Yes. His power was so great, he exacted more damage on our world than we expected. The previous Minister of Magic stepped down, because she couldn't handle it any longer. The Beings and Entities were busy with their own problems, but assisted us nonetheless. Anton was defeated and they turned their attentions on You-Know-Who. Perhaps the least powerful magical individual they had ever faced, the Celestials could have easily taken him out. A year-old Being or Entity could have defeated him, which went to show us how powerful they really are.

"But Fudge, with his superiority and head above the clouds, decided the Celestials had done enough. He declared the wizards to be able to handle themselves. Fudge never was one to share the glory. And if he were to bring down the worst sorcerer of all time, he'd do it by himself. Beings and Entities were still close with wizards and witches, so they ignored Fudge's inane claims and helped Aurors. Needless to say, the minister was livid with his orders being thrown aside. And when Zeus came down for the first time since he was appointed leader of Celestials, wizards and Celestials knew something horrible was taking place. Fudge outright demanded the ties between the worlds to be severed, and degraded Zeus. The High Being returned to Olympus irate, meanwhile the minister overturned laws, which had been millennia old or so. All laws associating the worlds were decimated. Fudge ordered wizards to never speak of Celestials again, and to speak of them only as myth. Friendships were reluctantly broken, families ripped apart...it's what You-Know-Who had wanted all along. Disarray. Chaos. Separation between friends and family. And his wish was received, and he celebrated for months. We all know what happened afterward. The Beings and Entities were outraged at what finally brought the wizarding menace down. But they could do nothing, as they were still deemed legend and fabrication.

"All laws dealing with Celestials were buried deep in the reaches of the Ministry's commandments. Except for the one law that could change the outcome of the worlds, forging the worlds together once more. Both headmasters of the schools shunned the minister's proposal and kept the law intact. They had been best friends, after all, for decades. And still are. Hogwarts School, and Aripedes

Academy kept the school edict: if anything happens to Hogwarts, they can depend on Aripedes, and vice-versa. The law had only been used once centuries ago, before now." Remus blinked a few times, and massaged his temples.

"You lot are a privileged group," Sirius started after moments of silence. Everyone let Remus' story sink in. "You are expected to rebuild the decrepit alliances of old. A task in itself." Harry frowned, thinking of the tale.

"All this time," he began in a far-off tone. "Don't you think they'd still be bitter?" Sirius raised his eyebrow.

"Did any of them seem bitter in Diagon Alley?" Harry thought this over. Other than the few sullen-faced individuals, he couldn't seem to sense any resentment.

"No," he answered in a worried tone. "But that wasn't in school."

"Do you think they'd change?" Ginny asked. Remus shook his head.

"There will be some young students who will house some feelings of bitterness, but from what our friends've assured, you will not encounter much animosity." Harry blinked at the statement, eying them askance.

"You were friends with Celestials?" he asked of Sirius and Remus. The Weasley's leaned forward desperately and Hermione cocked her head to the side. Sirius smiled.

"Yes, we are. In fact, your mother's best friend was a Celestial. Your godmother, actually." Sirius divulged while adjusting his boots. He didn't catch the astonished and angry look on Harry's face. The young boy glared at the man and crossed his arms, falling back gruffly into his armchair. Remus caught the look and frowned at Sirius.

"What's wrong, Harry?" The Boy-Who-Lived looked up incredulously at the werewolf.

"My godmother?" he repeated. "How come no one ever told me I had a godmother? If Sirius couldn't have been my guardian, she sure could have!" Hermione gave him a nervous glance while Ron

remained silent. Sirius looked sadly at his godson. "I'm sure she realized she left me with those Dursleys. Those things you call my family. She could've adopted me! I'm sure Dumbledore kept her from taking me. But no, she couldn't even check on me! WHY DIDN'T SHE TAKE ME ANYWAY?" He bellowed, his face turning an angry crimson and glaring at everyone in the room.

"Eh, keep it down, boy." Moody growled. "You wouldn't want to alert the Muggles to our presence, would yeh?" Harry glowered at the disheveled man, whose magical eye shifted to the grimy window, no doubt looking for any Muggles. Sirius rested his hand on Harry's armrest, a gloomy expression adorning his face.

"She couldn't even see her own children for years, Harry, because of threats on their lives, as well as yours." He clarified, gaining curious looks from others and Harry. "Not to mention the Ministry made laws stating Celestials could never communicate with wizards or adopt them, even if they were family."

"And wizards couldn't even mention the word 'Celestial'." Remus added.

"Which the Order, naturally, disregarded." Tonks pointed out with a smirk. Hermione gazed at the Animagus pensively.

"Why couldn't she see her own children?" she asked. Sirius' eyebrows lowered sinisterly.

"Remember old Anton?" they nodded. "It was because of her he began his quest for domination. To impress her." He hissed distastefully. "He was infatuated with her, and wanted to make her his wife. She couldn't stand him, of course, and married to the one she'd been with for centuries."

"Centuries?" Ginny questioned, her, like every teenager present in the room, eyebrows flew up into her hairline. "Centuries?" Remus nodded.

"Most Celestials are immortal. Those that later married or bonded with Muggles or wizards, died out or were killed." He explained.

"Anton threatened her children's lives, and she stayed away from them for years. They live with their father." Sirius put in. "She's seen

them a few times, but even so, it's risky." Harry remained silent while all the conversation went on, and natural curiosity took over.

"So does she have a name, or should I even bother?" he spat lightly. Sirius smiled warmly and pat Harry's arm.

"Why, Harry, you're the most privileged wizard in the wizarding world, being the only child to have a Celestial for a godparent." He joked pleasantly. Harry huffed and rolled his eyes.

"Nothing's ever normal with me." Ron jabbed him lightly on the arm.

"Wicked! Not even Malfoy has Celestial godparents, Harry! If he says anything, you can rub it in his pale face!" he kidded. Harry glanced back at Sirius, who was watching the two with interest.

"Her name, Sirius?" he urged, a look of twisted boredom on his façade. With a dog-like smile, Sirius beamed.

"The Entity of War and Wisdom, Harry." He simply stated, a fanciful smile alighting his lean face. "Athena."

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Harry wrapped the covers tightly around him, up to his nose, staring blindly out the window beside the snoozing Ron's bed. He was wide awake in the wee hours of the morning, the day he just had recurring behind his wide, green eyes. Ron shifted in his sleep but continued to snore, mumbling about red hair and girls. So Celestials existed. And the reason no one was informed was because of Minister Fudge. Hm.

Why wasn't he surprised.

Fudge had always been covetous and bigheaded, but to deny a powerful race the chance to rid them of Voldemort once and for all for glory? It was downright despicable. He mused to himself, if the Celestials had destroyed Voldemort, they would have done it correctly. Then he wouldn't entertain himself with Harry every year. Then again, maybe he was the only one with the power to destroy Voldemort. The prophecy stated such. Perhaps fate and destiny made the feud occur, so he'd be the one with the weight on his



shoulders. He'd be the one to suffer. But part of him gnawed slightly on his mind.

If the Celestials had killed Voldemort, he'd be with his parents. Maybe even have a full family.

Ron jolted awake and shot straight up. Harry shook himself in surprise before watching his panting, clammy friend glance around the room. His dark hair was a mess on his moist head, and he took huge gulp.

"Ron, you okay?" Harry asked, waiting for the redhead to respond. The boy flinched at Harry's voice, looking in his direction, but avoiding his eyes. Harry wanted to say more, but let the boy speak. He had been acting strange for a few days...weeks, even.

"Yeah, just...bad dream." He laid himself back under the covers and turned away from Harry. "Night, Harry." The young Gryffindor's face scrunched in puzzlement before he, too, settled back into his pillow.

"Good night, Ron." Soon, the room was filled with sounds of Ron's light breathing, and Harry's eyelids drooped to a close over his emerald orbs. A hopeful night of clean, non-dreaming was not what he received.

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Harry stood on the damp, singed lawn and looked around him. Lights from the windows of the castle illuminated the grounds, as well as the small fires burning out here and there. The young wizard could see no one surrounding him, yet felt a slight tug. Not bad, but he was wary. His robes were charred, his hands, grimy and black, and a pattern of tears and rips mottled his cloak. The Gryffindor crest that hung over his left breast was ripped, and he could see the small slash congealing. His wand hung carelessly in his right hand, an extension of himself, yet he felt no pull to use it. Where was the danger? What had caused such damage?

The answer...yes, the answer was there.

The forest to his right was as dark as ever, black and forbidding, yet, tantalizing. It was there, so close....The answer to this destruction.

Harry felt his feet begin to move toward the forbidden woods, calling him, beckoning.

Yes, it was there....

He had reached the outer edges of the forest. Right there was where he met Barty Crouch, Sr. And there was when he entered the forest for the first time, ever. Gripping his wand tightly, Harry pushed past a large branch and entered the forest.

It was silent. Oddly quiet. No animal moved. No noise was made. And none was heard. The very wind seemed to halt itself, and the leaves were still. He felt his shoes crunching the dead leaves and twig beneath him, but no sound was heard. This was not real. This could not be possible. It could even be a trick by Voldemort, like the Department of Mysteries. But the answer was here.

No sense in turning back now.

He continued his silent trek through the darkness, his harsh breaths unheard by his ears and the stillness of nature. The young wizard didn't even know where he was going, but he felt drawn. His soundless feet were moving his body. The tug within him getting persistent. He had to get there quickly. But where was there?

Where the answer was, of course....

Everything was so dark. The sharp branches clumped together wildly, scratching his face, ripping mercilessly into his smooth skin, but he felt nothing. No pain. Blood barely seeped out of his facial cuts, but he needed to get there. There? Where the answer was....

His legs, they marched through the brush, the thickets, the pain. Yes, it wouldn't be long now. His wand was getting slippery in his grasp, his palms sweaty from gripping it tightly. Why did he need it? There were no dangers about tonight. Just darkness, tranquility, calm. Peace. The answer...the answer was...there!

A small dot of light came from the next set of thickly-trunk trees. Harry trotted to the area, and the light became bigger. It was white. Purity. Innocence. Safety. Goodness. The answer.

He broke into a run. He didn't care if he was seen. It was good. It was worth it. The Gryffindor reached the edge. It was a clearing. A circle of trees, surrounding a small, illuminated clearing. He entered cautiously, his wand slack in his right hand, and felt them. Eyes. Watching, waiting. Mouths moving. Hands folded before them. Clean, clean white robes. Watching. But not him.

The Boy-Who-Lived stood behind the focus of their attention. No one seemed to notice his sudden arrival. They continued talking, their mouths moving, but no sound broke the stillness. It was peaceful, calm....The cloaked figure had red, short hair, and wore a white cloak. White, like those with the accusing stares. Pure. Clean. Innocent. Harry edged toward it. He wanted it. Pure and clean. And innocent. He moved closer and closer, his shoes never making a sound against the low woodland grass. The Gryffindor was close...feet...inches...and then the eyes swung to him. Heads turned simultaneously. Safe...he was wanted here. Slowly, the white-cloaked figure turned around to face him. The person exuded power, barely containable, but they controlled it. Words were uttered from the noiseless mouths. Yes, it was here. Harry looked at the red-haired figure and smiled. Yes...he reached out his hand, and the individual, the nameless, faceless individual took it. He somehow knew it—or sensed it. They were smiling. Beaming, with the power of one thousand suns. As their hands met in a handshake, Harry noted his hand—as well as the other's—glowed a bright gold. The other hand-folded people smiled. Yes, the answer was here.

And Harry was shaking hands with them.  
A/N: Revised chapter.

## Chapter Six: Onward

A groan could be heard from beneath the pile of blankets on the cot nearest the door, as Harry Potter woke up. The Gryffindor threw the sheets aside and opened his eyes to view the blurry, empty bed of Ron Weasley. The redhead was nowhere in sight. Placing his glasses on his nose, the young wizard ruffled his glossy, long black hair and stumbled out of bed. Harry walked to the bathroom and gazed in the mirror. His hair was in dire need of a haircut; perhaps, he'd ask Mrs. Weasley after breakfast. The black, messy locks seemed to take on a life of its own as they barely brushed his shoulder. He again released an audible groan.

"Why couldn't I have inherited mum's hair?" he grunted. Just the thought of his mother hair, and the boy's eyes widened. Red hair. White cloaks. It came rushing back to him.

His dream. The redhead, the white-cloaked people, the forest. The feelings. What happened? Why was he drawn to the forest so easily? Was this another trick of Voldemort's? Harry quickly showered, tucked his wand in his side pocket and headed downstairs to breakfast. Luckily, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny sat at the table, wallowing in their breakfasts. Mrs. Weasley had already started scrubbing some dishes, and appeared drained. Murmuring his mornings around the table, Harry quickly slid next to Ron and languidly ate. His mind remained on his dream, and Harry found he wasn't very hungry. The young seeker finished his breakfast before his friends, their minds rather occupied at the time. Ron seemed paler than usual, and Hermione, more tired. Ginny's face was colored as normal, but her thoughts were obviously elsewhere. She was the first to leave the table and head wherever, no one asking her any questions. Harry offered to help Mrs. Weasley with the dishes, but she flat out refused. With a genial pat, she sent him on his way. Ron and Hermione remained silent at the table as he left.

Deciding to head back to the drawing room for a quiet, boring day, Harry settled into the couch, previously occupied by Ginny, Hermione and Ron the day prior, and glanced down at the newspapers littering the tea table. One was yesterday's Daily Prophet, no doubt Hermione's, and the other was The Olympic Herald. The scene of the museum raid was still in motion, the black and white figures shaking their heads at the ruined building. Harry elected to learn more about the happenings in a world he had

thought never existed, since he'd be spending a full year with Olympus' next Beings and Entities. Seizing the paper, Harry read the headline and the story with mild interest.

## OLYMPIC MUSEUM OF HISTORY HIT

By Annette Wentworth

A third in a series of supposedly unrelated burglaries, the Olympic Museum of History was attacked last night by a group of evil wizards known as Death Eaters. These Death Eaters ransacked the entire museum and left it in ruins. Thankfully, no Being or Entity was hurt during their raid, but several attendants were placed under the Cruciatus Curse.

"When we find these Death Eaters, they will go directly to trial for using magic on Beings and Entities. Especially an Unforgivable such as the Cruciatus." Enforcer Sergeant Macchus Livelby proclaimed.

What was truly unnerving, however, was the fact that the Death Eaters didn't take any of the precious artifacts in the museum.

"We've taken inventory of all of our objects. Apparently, the Death Eaters didn't take anything. It was merely an escapade to them. A chance to have fun." Curator Giles Bastian explained in obvious disgust. Enforcers will keep a close watch and continue to investigate the break-in.

"Rest assured, we will attempt to keep a close watch on Death Eater activity." Sgt. Livelby stated.

See A Look Back on Celestial & Magical Artifacts on page A4. – Annette Wentworth.

"Who breaks into a museum and steals nothing?" Harry voiced aloud to no one in particular. He truly wasn't expecting anyone to answer.

"Obviously someone who is deathly bored of the drab museum and is seeking to liven it up a bit." Ron's voice cut in as he walked into the drawing room. Hermione followed him in with a frown. The two settled in either armchair, Hermione grabbing yesterday's Prophet, and Ron reading the Quidditch book he brought with him.

Harry flipped through the newspaper until he landed on the page with the list of artifacts. The Gryffindor nonchalantly skimmed through the list of artifacts and the biography of each of them. The Hesper Jewel, the Cerulean Diamond, the Sword of Amenophus, the Staff of Merlin, the Bluestone Daggers, the Ring of Phedra, the Onyx Seeing Stone, the Helmet of Athena, the Ravenstone Scepter, the Lyre of Orpheus...the list went on to include many others. And all (that were in existence) were accounted for; not one of them was missing. He sighed deeply. It made no sense.

"Well, we only did just learn about them," he mused to himself. "Oh, look. Godmother's helmet. Must see that one day." He spoke sarcastically while scanning the biographies over again. "Voldemort didn't find what he wanted," he concluded. "And now what he wants is on our side." Hermione nodded distractedly.

"Mm-hmm, Harry." Ron answered dazedly. Harry skimmed the article, reading over the reports.

"Ah, no. The curator's wrong. The Death Eaters weren't looking to have fun. They were looking for the weapons. They didn't find them. Reckon we should tell the Celestials which Death Eaters were probably responsible?" he queried, turning the page. Hermione's mouth cocked to the side.

"No. Like us, they probably couldn't find the Death Eaters." She shot down. "And we've really no way to contact the main Celestials. Remember, we know nothing about them, but myth."

"Mm, right..." Ron flipped through his Quidditch book, absorbed in the techniques and skills of various players. Hermione merely shook her head and caught Harry's eye. Tossing the paper aside, Harry scratched his head and sat in silent thought. Hermione took this to be the end of their conversation and returned to yesterday's paper. Ron absently nodded, his eyes glued to his Quidditch tome.

"Of course, Harry. That's right..." he murmured, not realizing the end of the conversation. "Weapons, hmm." With an amused look at each other, Hermione and Harry returned to their tasks, reading and contemplating respectively.

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"Have you packed your things, Harry?" Remus asked the boy at dinner, to which he answered with a nod. The four teenagers and various Order members sat at the table eating a great end-of-summer feast a few days later. Hermione was chewing on some meat while reading her latest Transfiguration study guide, propped against a flagon of butterbeer. Ginny avidly conversed with Tonks, absorbed in their conversation, while Fred and George spoke with their older brother, Bill. The teenagers would return to their school the next morning, and finally come face to face with the legends they've heard the adults go on about for days. Harry still winced at his recent memory.

He had been talking to Hermione and Ron a few days prior, as the three had traded their burning questions about the Celestial world. Mad-Eye Moody had entered their little session and began a two-hour lecture on all he had experienced with Celestials. Though Hermione had intently listened, Ron and Harry had to force each other to stay awake, since their fluttering lids could not beat Moody's ever-watchful magical eye. It shifted to them every time their eyelids drooped too low in the retired Auror's opinion. Ron had jolted from many near-naps as Moody rudely rapped on the kitchen table. Harry was sure to seal all entries when he needed to speak to his friends from then on.

The days had passed fluidly, all jumbling with each other. The young black-haired boy absently picked at his hair before consuming another forkful of meat. Across the table, Bill glanced at the Boy-Who-Lived and shook his head mock-disapprovingly. Harry arched an eyebrow at the long, red-haired Weasley before he answered the teen.

"How could you, Harry?" he accused. "You let her touch your hair?" Bill affectionately toyed with his long ponytail, as Harry grabbed a short lock of black hair. It was true; Harry had timorously approached Mrs. Weasley the day before, and asked her to trim his wild, unmanageable locks. He could clearly picture her thoughtful expression before she seized her wand and spoke a few incantations and declared the task done. When Harry first looked in the mirror Mrs. Weasley had conjured, he couldn't even believe it. His hair was much shorter, but still kept the messy look, as if he had done it professionally by a Muggle stylist.

She let him know that it would remain as such for the full year, so he wouldn't have to worry about it getting out of hand again. The only way it would grow again is if the young man willed it so. Since he was in no rush to regain the choppy Black Sea atop his head, Harry decided to keep it for now. He grew rather fond of the messy-yet-modish look, and was praised by Hermione, Ginny, and even Tonks. Ron, being the typical teenage boy he was, complimented his hairstyle, joking that he'd finally put its untidy charm to good use.

"Well, I like it," Ginny defended. "It suits him well." Harry blushed as many faces turned to appraise his new haircut. Sirius appeared thoughtful, as he had seen it many times before, and Bill rolled his eyes. Fred gave his older brother a lopsided frown before gripping the single red pigtail.

"Dunno, Bill." He examined the rope of crimson hair. "Reckon you could do with one of mum's cuts. This one's getting a bit wild, eh?" He tugged none-too-gently on the lock of hair before Bill yanked it from his hands and glared at him. Ginny hid her laugh behind her glass while the others produced varying degrees of tiny smiles and returned to their meals.

"Always the rebellious one, that Bill." George spoke solemnly. Bill shifted his glare to the other twin.

"Mind you, I'm not the one who broke out of school before graduating and rode off into the sunset." He hoped to remind the two of their impulsive escape from Hogwarts when Umbridge was acting headmistress, yet it only served to alight their faces with fanciful, identical smiles.

"Reckon we're still the only ones to make such a grand and impressive departure." George considered.

"You are," Ginny confirmed. "Unless Firenze or Snape throws a fit and storms out of the castle in pumps..." she thought for a while before receiving reproving looks from Hermione and Mrs. Weasley. Sirius, of course, pictured the scene and barked heartily in laughter, George, Fred, Tonks, Ron, Bill, and Harry chortling wildly with him. Remus gave a wry smile and returned to his meal.

"Young lady," Mrs. Weasley warned. Ginny's smile quickly dissolved and her face drooped sadly. Mrs. Weasley removed her stare from



her daughter and turned to the rest. "Everything ready for tomorrow?" Choruses of "Yes, mum" and "Yes, Mrs. Weasley" came from the quartet. Harry couldn't help but notice the grim look upon Sirius' face. He was to spend another year at headquarters, if not taking on missions for the Order. As Dumbledore probably saw fit to keep him in one place for safety, the innocent convict most likely wouldn't see much of the outside unless it was through a window. Harry frowned and immediately Sirius turned to his godson.

"Harry?" he questioned worriedly.

"Nothing." The young wizard answered, pushing his meal around. Dessert was later served and soon Harry found himself in the Black family drawing room one last time before he embarked on another school year. The fire crackled austerely as Harry reflected on all he was leaving behind. The house. His stirring summer. Remus, Tonks, Mr. & Mrs. Weasley.

Sirius.

He didn't want his godfather cooped up so long in the house, but he didn't want him out where he could encounter much danger. He'd almost lost him in the Department of Mysteries earlier this summer. What would life have been like if Sirius didn't circumvent the spell in time? The rising sixth year was so engrossed in his own reflections, he did not notice the arrival of another occupant until he felt the couch sink under new weight.

Harry's eyes whipped to catch the mischievous blue orbs of said godfather, a sad smile decorating his thin face. He returned the smile, but focused back on the fire before him. The silence in the room was only pierced by the intermittent crackles of flame. Sirius remained unusually restrained studying the rug beneath their shoes and his shabby cloak alternately. Either would have welcomed the strident clatter of a thousand pins so that one may talk, but neither volunteered to begin. Was it so hard to speak to the one you viewed not only as the main link to your past, but as a surrogate parent?

And the only reminder of your most treasured childhood, the one you'd yearned to call 'son'—what was so difficult about speaking to him? Neither ever had problems talking to each other in the past. A godparent and godchild relationship is one of the most prestigious relationships on Earth. The bond each shares is spectacular,

surpassing that of close-acquaintance love, and reaching as far as familial affection. Whatever the parent cannot accomplish, the godparent can; especially when it came to the Boy-Who-Lived. Such love cannot come from parents or loved ones; the special affection and adoration from the titleholders came from whatever deity that oversaw the worlds within Earth. A love that flowed through the Animagus' very veins. A hint of a chuckle was heard from the convict.

"Wow, this is some deep-seated sh..."

"What?" Harry queried in confusion. Sirius closed his eyes and looked away from his godson. What a way to ruin a productive, albeit quiet moment. He smiled doggedly at Harry, his grin unbalanced and cheerful.

"Never mind, Harry." He assured. "You seem to be lost in thought. Mind telling?" Harry swallowed thickly and his brows furrowed. This did nothing to quell the disheveled older wizard. "What?"

"It's just...I'm leaving tomorrow." Harry began, choosing his words carefully. "And..." Sirius caught the look in his godson's emerald eyes and latched on to his worry.

"You're worried about leaving me here. You think I'd be alone. Bitter. A deep brooder." Harry reluctantly nodded at his godfather's words. "Very kind of you, Harry."

"Mm."

"But I won't be alone. There's Remus, of course, and Tonks. Lest we forget Moody, Molly and Arthur. Dung should be back within a few weeks, so there's some good entertainment." He clarified.

"But what if Dumbledore sends you on another mission? Like your last one?" Harry inquired. Sirius actually smiled.

"Actually, if all goes as planned, we really won't have to work as hard this year." He stealthily answered. "We've got new members in the Order—not that any of you would know." Harry stared in utter bafflement at his guardian.

"Really? I suppose it's going well? Gaining new recruits." He toyed with a plush pillow tassel.

"Well, you see, Harry—they aren't exactly new members..." Sirius found interest in the rug again and followed the intricate patterns as Harry glanced at him.

"What are you on about?" he questioned. "If they aren't new, what are they, old? Members who you thought had run away?" Sirius remained looking at the carpet.

"They've been in the Order since Voldemort's first slow and steady rise. Only last year, they couldn't have come, what with all the commotion about. This year, they come more quietly." Harry delved into different levels of confusion, Sirius steering at the helm.

"Sirius, what are...what?" With a heavy sigh, Sirius turned to face Harry. "They've been here frequently, and we've never seen them? Lots of them?"

"Something like that, yes." Harry wracked his fuzzy mind for answers. Lack of doing homework for a month and barely reading school texts caused his brain to slowly function during the last few weeks.

"Sirius, why aren't you...? And what would keep them away from the Order all year? It wasn't as if..." and as if the heavens parted and shone a ray of light on the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry finally figured it out. "They're Celestials. Your Order members are Celestials." He stated more to himself than to the Animagus.

"Right."

"And they couldn't risk it by coming into our world last year, but this year, the worlds are reunited once more." He continued, staring back at the fire.

"Spot on." Sirius praised. "Although it didn't hurt them before to sneak into our world." Harry gave his godfather another look, to which the last of the Blacks shrugged. A lost thought was suddenly found again by the young wizard.

"But Mad-Eye showed me a picture of the Order last year." He revealed to Sirius, who listened in interest. "And everyone in the picture was a wizard; he pointed them all out to me." Sirius chuckled in a gentle tone.

"That picture is truly old. A newer one was taken months later, but now resides with the Celestials. Been a while since I've seen that one." He replied thoughtfully. Sirius turned to his best friend's offspring with a genuine, parental grin. "Sixth year will be a bit heavy, what with N.E.W.T.s coming in seventh. I don't doubt you'll find friendship in the visiting Celestials, since—"

"I'm the 'Boy-Who-Lived'." Harry folded his arms sarcastically.

"No," Sirius corrected forcefully. "Since you are a charming young man, who is full of integrity and compassion. Not to mention the Potter blood runs through your veins like the Nile." Harry snickered at his godfather's comment. "Try not too get into too much trouble this year. Just a bit. Do us proud. And remember, if ever you want to speak to me, use the mirror. I promise I'll answer it nine times out of ten." Sirius wrapped his arm around Harry's shoulder and hugged him warmly. This was foreign to Harry, as only Hermione and Mrs. Weasley hugged him frequently. "Life is an adventure. Don't take it too seriously. If you do, you're sure to end up like old Snivelly." At Harry's shudder, Sirius chortled jovially. A stray glimpse of his unreal future passed across his emerald eyes as Harry imagined sitting in a dark room in front of a low fire, with long, greasy black locks.

"That's not very comforting, Sirius."

"I'm very proud of you, Harry. We all are." And Harry didn't need to confirm with the Animagus, that Sirius meant his parents.

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The dank, sleepy neighborhood, riddled with grime and trash, was lit by the bleak morning. The light of dawn poured through filthy casements, yet no one was up at such an early hour. Birds never wasted their delightful songs on the ragged community, and new life opted to grow elsewhere, a place more appreciative. Flat silence rang extensively over the shabby homes, with their ramshackle rooftops and eroded doors, which made all sojourners quickly pass.

Silence is a wonderful compatriot of this town. The only welcome visitor.

Silence is precisely what the resting occupants of Number 12, Grimmauld Place begged for.

Harry woke up to hear utter chaos and insanity stirring beyond his door. Opening one eye cautiously, Harry viewed the slumbering, blurry body of Ron, half hanging off his bed. A quick glance at the clock made Harry groan and bury his head in his pillow.

6:58 AM.

He wasn't supposed to get up until eight. But the loud, shouting voices behind his and Ron's bedroom door did not want to cooperate with the lulls of sleep. And how could Ron still lie there in siesta with those rudely awakening tones?

Harry pulled the cover over his head, which still didn't seem to help, and made out the voices. One was Tonks. She sounded like she was on their floor. The other, of course, was Mrs. Weasley. The third, Harry rolled his eyes at, was Sirius—yelling at Mrs. Black. Naturally, the portrait shouted filth and obscenities to her living son, and Sirius good-naturedly bellowed them back. Kingsley's strong voice was heard, and Harry could only imagine the tall, Black wizard assisting the Animagus to close her curtain. As if on cue, Mrs. Black's shouting ceased. The house was quiet again. A drowsy smile stretched across Harry's face before his lids flapped shut.

"MOLLY!"

Harry's eyes snapped open agitatedly, and he threw off the covers to look at the clock.

6:59 AM.

Tonks would be the first to die when Harry got out of his bed.

With a loud grumble, Harry buried himself under his thick covers again, Ron's snores piercing the silence. Silence. The raven-haired wizard closed his eyes and yawned. Maybe now he'd get back to sleep. God forbid he actually woke up early during his last free

morning. Feeling the pulls of sleep, Harry willingly succumbed, Ron's snores fading in the distance of consciousness.

BANG!

The boys' door was thrown open noisily.

"WAKE UP! TIME TO GET READY!" Tonks yelled, a hint of amusement in her tone. Harry shot up as the door was bashed open, and Ron cried something incoherent. Both boys glared at the blue-haired Metamorphmagus, who gave them an innocent smile and exited. Harry frowned grumpily and glanced at the clock on the dresser.

7:01 AM.

A guttural growl escaping his lips as Harry shoved on his glasses and swung his focus on Ron. The puffy, sluggish red-eyed, Weasley's hair looked worse than normal, and his face boiled crimson in irritation.

"The nerve of her to disturb our sleep." He mumbled as he fixed his bed. Harry got up to do the same, tossing his sheets carelessly.

"Maybe not yours...." He murmured, lobbing his pillow at the headboard.

After showering, the two boys packed their remaining items in their trunks, and hauled them and their owl cages to the landing. There, they met a sour-faced Hermione and a sleepy, yet foul-tempered Ginny, both with their trunks beside them. Crookshanks mewled pathetically in his wicker cage, and Hermione scowled at the cat, absently taking her anger out on the innocent feline. Harry and Ginny noticed Hermione's mood, as it was identical to theirs, but Ron, mindlessly went into conversation with her.

"What's wrong with you, Hermione? Stay up late to reread all your schoolbooks?" he joked tiredly. The bushy brown-haired witch glowered at the prefect, and Crookshanks mewled warningly.

"I had to do some late packing, Ronald." She answered through gritted teeth.

"Admit it, Hermione. You want to kill Tonks just as much as we do." He quickly changed the subject.

"You'll have to wait in line," replied Ginny.

"If anyone's first, it's me," Harry added. "She woke me up before seven."

"What time is it?" Hermione glanced at her watch and yawned.

"Seven forty-five." Mad-Eye and Kingsley ascended the steps, the renowned magical eye whirring to their trunks. One look at the droopy-eyed, acid-faced teenagers and Auror Shacklebolt chuckled.

"Tonks?" he questioned. The four looked at him in slow disbelief.

"No, Fudge with a Filibuster Firework in his knickers. Who else?" Ginny hissed sarcastically. Kingsley merely shook his head, and pat Ginny on her ginger head before handing Hermione Crookshanks' carrier. He flicked his wand and levitated hers and Ginny's trunks, while Moody handled the boys'. Stretching jadedly, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny followed the older wizards down the steps as Harry lagged behind. He heard the door slam behind them, and stopped at the top of the stairs to see who it was.

Tonks emerged from a guest room down the corridor, levitating a heavy-looking trunk. It was tattered and black, pieces of mature leather hanging off the sides, or peeling. She apparently didn't notice him as she looked to the floor below and watched the other teenagers on their way to the kitchen. Harry crossed his arms and glared at the young Auror nearing his position.

"I've a bone to pick with you." He spoke. Tonks gave a startled yell as she was jerked out of her daydreaming by Harry. The trunk she was guiding collided painfully with the young wizard as she didn't stop it in time. Both Harry and the trunk went tumbling down the stairs much like Ginny did the year before.

"Oh! HARRY!" he vaguely heard Tonks cry out, and muffled footsteps came from every direction. Quickly tucking himself in a ball, Harry toppled down the stairs, lessening the chance of fatal injury. Tonks' footfalls echoed down the narrow steps, clunking hollowly, as Harry rolled down the winding steps and landed with a thud on his

back. The trunk—thankfully—landed to the side of him, and the young wizard blinked in shock. With his ear so close to the dusty floor, Harry could hear stifled footsteps racing from the foyer corridor, coming from the kitchen. Tonks reached him first, followed by Sirius.

"Harry, are you all right?" Sirius asked, panic written on his face.

"Oh, Harry! I'm so sorry! I'm so clumsy! Bloody me!"

"Bloody hell, what happened?" Ron voiced somewhere behind Sirius, Remus and Kingsley. Harry felt a dull ache forming on his upper back, since it rammed into the ground to stop him. His sides were smarting dimly, and surprisingly, nothing else hurt. He distractedly registered Tonks' frantic ramblings beside him.

"Oh, he's dead! I've killed him! Oh, he'll never forgive me!" she blathered.

"Oh, shut up, Tonks." He groaned. Her eyes snapped to Harry, and a bright, relieved beam formed on her face. Immediately, she smothered Harry in a bear hug and desperate kisses. "Ah, ah! Tonks stop! I never died."

"Tonks, give him some room." Sirius instructed, shoving his distant cousin off his godson. Harry grinned at Sirius' smirking face. "Not even in school yet and you've had an adventure. Tell me, how were those steps?"

"Hard enough." Harry winced. Remus knelt beside his best friend and eyed Harry carefully.

"Do you think anything's broken?" he asked. Harry shook his head.

"It aches, but I feel fine."

"Think you can get up?" Harry slowly moved into a sitting position, and Remus and Sirius pulled him to his feet. Nothing else seemed to be out of place or broken, so Harry stretched cautiously. A few bones popped, but all was well. Sirius thumped him on the back gingerly, and led him through the crowd.

"I've got a few potions in the kitchen for pain, Potter," Mad-Eye grunted. "I'll get them for you." With that, Moody clunked away,



Kingsley tailing behind him. Tonks righted the trunk she was carrying, and mumbled something before levitating it back up the steps. Ron, Ginny and Hermione glanced worriedly at Harry, Hermione's token 'I-don't-believe-you' glint twinkling in her brown eyes. Harry narrowed his green eyes slightly at the Gryffindor know-it-all, faintly peeved at her expression.

"I'm fine." He grumbled to his friends. Without another word, the large group headed to the kitchen, Harry grudgingly walking between his parents' best friends.

Breakfast was a quick affair, and Mrs. Weasley made each teenager shove a heaping breakfast down their throats. As promised, Moody had the potions ready for Harry as he entered with Sirius and Remus. He felt much better as he sat at the table with his friends, but did not want to trouble Moody for getting the potions for him. Harry drank the blue and green potions after his fourth helping of scrambled eggs, and felt a comfortable warmth radiate through his back and body correspondingly. After his potions were taken, Hermione appeared seemingly content.

"Weather's good today." Ron enlightened. The others agreed.

"Must be a Celestial's doing." Remus sipped his tea and suggested. Four pairs of eyes landed interestedly on the ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor.

"They can control the weather?" Ginny inquired, a yearning expression on her face.

"They can do anything. Control weather, inhabit dreams," Remus listed. At this revelation, Ron's eyes widened and his pale hands inattentively clutched his head. "Seek others out, even fuel the feeling of vengeance."

"They don't do it often, very rarely." Sirius added. "Only to help others."

"The good Celestials...." Remus corrected.

The four were currently in the entrance hall of Grimmauld Place, huddled around the door. They threw on their sweaters and coats while waiting for their—rather, Harry's—guard. Sirius looked forlorn,

but put on a brave face for the others. He caught Harry's eye several times, and the two exchanged small smiles. Harry was sad to leave his godfather again, but knew he'd enjoy his time much better with close friends and Order members filtering in and out of the haggard house all year. Not to mention, Harry definitely would be coming back for the Yuletide holidays.

Kingsley leaned against the door, his arms folded across his chest, and eyes shut. Ginny and Hermione were talking in bored tones about classes, while the young sixth year wizards traded talk on Quidditch. Ron had forgotten that Katie had, in fact, graduated, since she usually hung out with the younger years and fellow Chasers Angelina and Alicia, rather than her own year mates. The young redhead seemed concerned they now had two spots to fill, if not four; neither knew if Fred and George's replacement Beaters wanted to continue with their Beater duties or quit. It was then Moody clunked down the steps, followed by Remus and Molly. Moody was sporting a heavy brown trench coat, and a wide-brimmed burgundy hat, which concealed most of his upper face. He pulled the collar of the coat high to cover the rest of his mangled face, a reminder of the battle scars he could never abandon. Remus wore a faded navy-knit sweater and trousers, a brown jacket draped over his arm, and Mrs. Weasley a heavy-knit shawl and hat.

"You lot ready?" Molly asked them once more. The teenagers chorused their response, Hermione glancing at her Muggle wristwatch. Harry looked at her in interest and she answered his unasked query.

"Eight forty-eight." She responded. Harry nodded, then lowered his brows, looking to his godfather.

"How are we getting to the station? The Knight Bus?" he asked. Remus adjusted his sweater and pulled on his jacket. Ron and Ginny sided with Harry, also asking how they were to travel to the station.

"You don't expect us to walk the way there again, do you?" she asked sarcastically, nudging Harry gently in the ribs. "We could always take broomsticks. Reenact Fred and George's escape from Umbridge. That'll leave the first years impressed."

"Not to mention the Muggles." Moody growled. "And it was only twenty minutes. The way you're going, you'd never make it halfway into the Auror program. Aurors must be able to keep their guards up and walk great distances, lest we forget—"

"Mad-Eye, if you start talking about the program, not only will they miss the train, but the end of seventh year, too." Tonks trudged down the steps unnoticed by everyone. Moody's mouth contorted into a scowl, but with all of the scarring on his face, one could never be sure. "You all must go. The cavalcade should be here soon." The teens glanced between each other and then to various adults.

"We're going by car?" Ginny questioned excitedly. At Sirius' nod, she squealed and nearly knocked over the trunks. Remus looked at his watch and began.

"We'd better get ready," he started. Kingsley glanced out a nearby window. "The transportation'll—"

"They're already here. Just arrived." The bald Auror interrupted. "Let's go." Mad-Eye grunted and he and Kingsley each grabbed a trunk and heaved it out the door, Tonks holding the entrance open for them. The girls and Ron said their goodbyes to the young Auror, and she headed outside after Shackbolt and Moody. Harry despondently turned to Sirius, who merely gave the child an empty smile.

"Wish I could come with you," he shot Molly a glance. She was too busy fixing Ron and Ginny's clothing. "But we can't risk that again." Harry nodded in understanding. He didn't want the Animagus to be unexpectedly caught in something. And the way Malfoy acted last year, he knew about Sirius' ability. "Remember, life's an adventure." Again, the Boy-Who-Lived nodded. Kingsley and Mad-Eye lumbered back in, seizing the remaining trunks. Ron, Hermione and Ginny turned to the Animagus with sad smiles.

"Bye, Sirius." Ron shook the older wizard's hand. "We'll let you know of any pranks on Snape." Molly scowled at her son, but said nothing.

"You do that, Ron." He grinned. Hermione gave Sirius a quick hug and smile.

"Don't forget to write. And stay out of trouble." She ordered.

"I should be telling you that. No need to tell you to study hard." The bright witch colored and nodded. Ginny gripped Sirius in a vice-like hold and pecked him on the bristly cheek lightly.

"Feel free to send me any ideas for pranks." Molly's eyes narrowed and she glared at her youngest daughter.

"Send me any incriminating photographs of Snape and we're even." Sirius traded. Ginny thought pensively for a moment.

"Deal."

"Good luck on your O.W.L.s." Sirius added. Ginny threw him a pained grin and shook her head.

"Best not to remind me of that...." Finally, Sirius pulled Harry into his arms, and embraced him like a son.

"New opportunities and friendships await. Have an adventure this year." He whispered in his godson's ear. They parted, bestowed weak smiles to one another and the teenagers lifted the cages of their familiars. "Remember to be yourself with the Celestials. They'll do the same with you." Four heads bobbed up and down in affirmation, whimsical beams on their faces. They were about to embark on the first stage of meeting the Celestials.

"All right, you lot. Let's move." Molly commanded. She led the way out the door, followed by Hermione, Ginny, and Ron. Remus gave Sirius a poignant look and smiled at Harry before following. Harry anxiously swallowed, gripping the handle of the softly hooting Hedwig's cage tightly.

"See you at Christmas."

"I'll be waiting." Sirius winked and ruffled Harry's already short, unruly locks. The teenager turned and headed out the door, without a backward glance to his godfather.

Across the way, one of the two sleek, black, mid-sized, expensive-looking sport-utility vehicles' trunks slammed shut, and Hermione, Ron and Ginny were entering the second transport. Harry could see Remus talking to one of the drivers in the passenger seat. Mrs.

Weasley was in the first car, speaking with the other driver. Tonks was standing beside Kingsley and Moody near the second automobile, and Harry handed them his owl in her cage. After they received the last animal, Kingsley slammed the trunk shut and Harry expressed his farewell to Tonks. Auror Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye headed for the first SUV as Tonks entered the house and closed the door. In an instant, Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place disappeared, as if it had never existed.

Harry climbed into the vehicle and closed the door behind him, sitting with Ron in the back seat. The inside of the vehicle was decorated with tan leather, extending from the dashboard to the seats, and fine wood grain lined electronic devices in every instance. There were two front seats for the driver and passenger, two separate second row seats, and a narrow passage to the long backseat, which Harry shared with his best friend. The driver greeted Harry kindly, nodding to the boy and children after he finished his conversation with Remus.

"This is Daedelus Diomedes," Remus introduced. "He was sent here with his colleague by Spiridon Smythe. I'm told you four know of Spiridon." The older teenagers nodded while Ginny shook her head. Harry had forgotten; she wasn't present the night he told the room full of professors and ministry workers (and ex-Aurors and convicts, and Mrs. Weasley) about his latest vision. "Daedelus, this is Hermione, Ginny, Ron, and Harry." The werewolf pointed each of his former students out. Daedelus was not in anyway like the eccentric and excitable Dedalus Diggle; he wore a black Muggle suit, secured in place by his seatbelt. He appeared around his mid to late forties, with polished, short brown hair in a militaristic style. His hazel eyes were bright and inviting, and his thin, grinning lips were surrounded by a very clean, wispy beard. The man was as handsome and polished as Gilderoy Lockhart, minus the overbearing smile, robes and ego.

"Look forward to driving you all. Ron and Ginny—Weasleys, obviously. I'd recognize Molly and Arthur's handiwork anywhere. I say, where are the two others, the twins? Been a while since I've seen you all." He commented. Ginny quickly took to the stranger.

"They're working today." She answered, a hint of suspicion.

"And you, young lady." He glanced at Hermione with a smile. The young witch blushed. "You're Hermione..."

"Granger. My parents are Muggles." The clever Gryffindor answered when the chauffeur appeared to not recognize her surname. Daedelus nodded brightly.

"Must miss you terribly. You've been at headquarters for quite some time, haven't you? I do hope you've written them." Hermione blushed a lovely shade of Weasley red and again nodded. Harry was starting to like the man a bit more. His eyes finally turned on the Boy-Who-Lived. "Harry, of course. Spitting image of James, with Lily's bright eyes. I haven't seen you since you were but an infant." Harry blinked in response. An infant? So...

"You knew my parents?" he asked, rather than thank the odd driver's comment. He nodded somewhat.

"Not too well. I was more Remus and Sirius' friend than I was your parents'. Though I didn't get to see them much. Work and all." Harry wanted ask the man what type of work he did at the ministry, when the front SUV began to move. "Ah, here we are. Hope Eomel drives decently today. I swear, that boy goes so slow, flobberworms pass him by hundreds of kilometers..." Harry leaned back in his seat and attached his safety belt. With one last glance at where Number Twelve once stood, Harry didn't doubt his godfather would be watching them leave from a hidden window in the unhappy place.

The ride would be shorter, since the station was a mere twenty-minute walk, but he couldn't help but rake over his previous conversation. Yet another person who knew his parents. Not well, as he stated, but he knew them. Hermione was quietly absorbing the scenery, whereas Ginny flipped through a copy of Witch Weekly. Ron prodded the young wizard into conversation and Remus and Daedelus conversed lightly in the front. Before any of them were aware, they had reached King's Cross Station in record time. With many minutes to spare. Daedelus and the other driver pulled into parking spaces smoothly, and Remus quickly jumped out the SUV. The teenagers could see Mad-Eye exiting the other vehicle, following Remus. Daedelus and the other chauffeur, a tall, brown-eyed, blonde-haired, younger male opened the vehicular trunks and pulled out their school trunks and animals. The four students hopped out of the automobiles and Mrs. Weasley made sure all of them

were in good shape. Harry made sure his wand was still in his pocket before holding on to Hedwig's cage.

Remus and Mad-Eye returned with trolleys, which Kingsley and Daedelus loaded the trunks on. In minutes, the vehicles were locked and the ten individuals headed into the busy train station. The sun overhead warmed everything slightly, as it was still cast behind a few clouds. Was it really tampered with by a Celestial? Was that how the weather was determined? Sadness releases a small shower, anger unveils a violent storm...anxiety, a listless, empty sky, and excitement and happiness a day worthy of sunburn? Pig zoomed about anxiously in his cage, garnering curious looks from the passing Muggles.

Daedelus was pushing the trolley with Harry and Ron's trunks and pets, while Kingsley moved the other. Once they cautiously approached the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters, Mad-Eye entered first, followed by the other driver. Minutes later, Ginny and Hermione pretended to lean against the wall and disappeared. Molly trailed the young females. Harry and Ron casually propped themselves against the wall before they fell through onto the platform. Harry got his first glimpse of the scarlet steam engine in months, quickly joining the others on the platform. The platform had a few students on it, mainly timid first years, and a few older students with their parents or guardians.

Daedelus and Kingsley arrived with the trolleys loaded with cages and trunks and offered to place them in the baggage cart. The Gryffindors took their familiars in hand while they loaded the train. More students were pouring in from the barrier, and Harry couldn't help but feel out of place. Usually, he was sleeping now, since the train originally left at eleven. But now...the year had started awkwardly. They'd be living with Celestials, and now their train was leaving at ten. Harry scanned the small crowds for any sign of the Celestials, but he didn't see so much as a blink of a colorful cloak.

Harry could hear the faint whirring of Moody's swiveling magical eye, no doubt taking in the incoming students. Ginny and Ron were softly arguing about who should hold the darting Pigwidgeon's cage, while Hermione shook her head at the siblings' juvenile antics. Remus, Mrs. Weasley and the other driver were warily scanning the crowds and speaking in light, conversational tones. Hermione set

Crookshanks' wicker carrier beside her feet and checked her watch again.

"Nine fifteen." She sighed. "A good while before the Express takes off." Hedwig hooted glumly in her coop, and Harry kept his eyes on the arriving wizards and witches. He vaguely heard Remus ask the young driver if he and Daedelus would enjoy coming back to headquarters for tea and business, and a Moody grumbling about edgy children. Daedelus and Kingsley returned, joining the nearby group of adults, and the six spoke about the upcoming school year. There were still no signs of the Celestials.

"...here, take him and find a free compartment." Ron instructed Ginny. With that, he handed her the zooming Pig's cage and the fifth year ducked onto the train.

As more students spilled onto the platform with their parents, Harry, Ron, and Hermione acknowledged various members of their house. Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, forgetful boy, stumbled onto the platform dragging a trolley with his trunk, a formidable-looking witch accompanying him. Harry could see Neville's toad, Trevor, clutched tightly in his fist as he tugged the trolley along. Seamus Finnigan, a sandy-haired Irish boy, waved at them from afar with Dean Thomas, a Black boy, and Ginny's current beau. Ron forced a civil smile at his roommate before scowling when his back was turned.

The chatting adults, Kingsley, Lupin, Mrs. Weasley, Moody, Daedelus and his companion still conversed in low tones, and were watching the passing adults; Daedelus and his acquaintance nodded to some adults, clearly trying to recognize them. The black-haired wizard stood with Hermione and the grumbling Ron before his emerald eyes found the platform once more. No Celestials arrived with the next set of pupils, but a few members of Dumbledore's Army greeted their leader before boarding the train. Harry's stomach gave a feeble, pathetic sort of flop when the pretty Ravenclaw Seeker called Cho Chang beamed at him. They had...well, something going on last year, as he wouldn't have exactly called it a relationship. He remembered being in an unnecessary love triangle the previous year, between him, Cho and the deceased Cedric Diggory. Since he couldn't exactly compete with a dead wizard, the fling they sort of had diminished quickly. Though she was still lovely with her long, jet-black hair and womanly features, Harry seldom had faith in ever jumping back headlong into



that mess again. He noticed with great distaste that accompanying her was none other than Marietta Edgecombe, who had ratted them out to Umbridge. With some satisfaction (and he noted Hermione seemed somewhat pleased, also) he observed the word 'SNEAK' spelled onto her face last year, cleverly by Hermione's proficient prowess in spells, though it was a bit faded.

"It'll be completely gone by Christmas." She muttered unkindly. "She's lucky it wasn't for life." Harry agreed, watching the curly-haired girl bounce into the steam engine after Cho. After a few more minutes of silent conversation and observation, the Hogwarts Express whistle blared.

"Well, you lot better head in now," Mrs. Weasley instructed, adjusting Ron's coat absentmindedly, attempting to hide her emotions. "And you'll be off with the Celestials. My, how you're growing up..." Ron rolled his eyes.

"Mum, you're got us for another year. Save your emotion until then." He toned in slight embarrassment. Mrs. Weasley hugged him close, then Hermione and squeezed Harry. The young wizard was sure a few of his bones cracked audibly under her firm embrace. Mrs. Weasley released Harry and fixed his jacket and played with his short hair in a motherly fashion.

"You all be good. Stay out of trouble this year. You're going to be under much more scrutiny than normal." She warned. Remus shook Ron, Hermione and Harry's hand, before Ginny came rushing out to greet them. She hugged her mother and Remus respectively, along with Kingsley and a stunned Mad-Eye. Ron was right when he said he hugged everyone....She settled for shaking Daedelus and the other driver's hand before racing back to the train, mumbling something about saving the compartment. Daedelus shifted a bit near Kingsley.

"Well, Eomel and I must be off. We've got to make it back to headquarters and monitor the big migration." He stated, clapping his hands together. "Hermione, Ron, Harry, nice meeting you all. Do enjoy the school year." The train whistled behind them and students gave last hugs and kisses before zipping into a compartment.

"Behave, you three. You know where we are if you need us." Remus spoke. Molly dabbed her eyes and gave the three last hugs.

"Honestly, mum...." Ron's muffled voice was heard.

"Keep your guards up, eh?" Moody growled, adjusting his hat. "Never know what might happen within those walls...." The trio took the ex-Auror's advice lightly, having heard it time and time before, and sprinted onto the train. Hedwig hooted angrily as Harry shook the cage while running onto the steam engine and wedging through others in the narrow corridor. Passing by each corridor, Harry noticed many full ones, all crammed with students.

"Come on, Ginny's saving us a compartment." Ron stated, leading the way. "She's got to be here somewhere." As they went further and further into the train, Harry felt it give a lurch forward. They were heading back to Hogwarts. Back home. Some students stumbled into them, making Crookshanks hiss in irritation within his carrier. As the group passed yet another compartment, Harry almost called out to the others. There sat a girl sitting by her lonesome in this compartment, reading, what appeared to be a Muggle book. Her long red hair flowed over her shoulders, contrasting greatly with her midnight-hued turtleneck. Hermione and Ron took no notice of her and continued their trek far back in the train to find the youngest Weasley. With one last squint, Harry rushed to catch up to them, ignoring Hedwig's protests.

"Ah, finally." Ron pushed open the compartment door, and walked in. Ginny wasn't sitting alone; Luna Lovegood sat across from her, the Ravenclaw's blonde hair in an elegant braid, and The Quibbler wide open across her thighs.

"Where've you been?" Ginny asked the trio.

"Mum." Was all Ron said. "Ah, Luna." Her bright eyes scanned the redheaded boy and she nodded.

"Hello, Luna." Hermione greeted with nervous warmth. "Find any Crumple-Horn Snorkacks on your summer excursion?" Harry detected a fine trace of mocking in the Gryffindor prefect's voice, as she strongly disagreed with Luna's flighty ambience. He was oddly disturbed with Hermione for making fun of Luna; since he had spoken with her at the end of term, he held the girl in a new light of respect. She was already treated scathingly by others, and she

didn't need Hermione on her case, too. Luna, either ignorant or unfazed by Hermione's question, shook her head solemnly.

"The guide for Daddy and I said we came at an inconvenient time." She revealed moodily. "Mating season." Hermione made a strained sound in the back of her throat, but held her words.

"I'm sure you'll come across them next time." Harry encouraged with a plain smile. Hermione gave him an odd look before shaking her bushy brown head of hair. With a happier expression, the Ravenclaw addressed the Gryffindor Seeker.

"Harry." The aforementioned nodded and replied with a feeble greeting. He and Ron stored Hedwig and Pig's cage on the top shelves before sitting down. Hermione sat beside Ginny and liberated the agitated Crookshanks, who immediately sought refuge in Harry's lap. He looked oddly at the feline before patting him benignly and glancing at the magazine now in Luna's hands.

"How is The Quibbler doing?"

"Fairly well. Daddy's been getting quite a bit of mail about your interview." She replied, her eyes not once leaving the page. Harry raised his eyebrows, reminiscing about his previous interview with the magazine. Luna's father had sold it to the Daily Prophet before they left for summer break; sitting with Rita Skeeter had been one thing, but enduring the looks and stares from his schoolmates was quite another.

"What about those Celestials?" Ginny asked. "It should be a very interesting school year with them." Hermione and Ron nodded, the latter pulling out a pack of cards.

"Just one of the many things the Ministry's covered up," Luna pointed out. "Just like the existence of the Dog-Eared Wonkysnail." Hermione blinked rapidly before closing her eyes for a moment, in order to maintain her sanity. She shook her head slightly but said nothing. Harry took that as a sign of letting the others know her frustration; such an animal probably never existed.

"Well, what do you think, Luna?" she asked, keeping her impatience at bay. "How do you think the year will turn out?" Luna lazily flipped the page, turning the periodical sideways and squinting.

"What with the Celestials," she answered. "Finally interacting with the wizarding world...all right." Ron gave Harry a masked look and turned back to Luna.

"Wonder how they're getting to Hogwarts."

"No doubt riding on the backs of Giant Winged Rabbits." Hermione pulled out a book from her knapsack. Ron and Harry stifled a snigger.

"Dean reckons they're taking a train." Ginny sifted through her bag to pull out an older edition of The Quibbler. Ron's face burned red and he narrowed his eyes at her. Any mention of his sister's boyfriends and he immediately became defensive.

"What else does lover boy have to say on the subject?" he jeered.

"I wouldn't know. Dean and I aren't dating." Ron's eyes widened and he looked at Harry and Hermione to see if they knew anything.

"You broke up?"

"Two days after summer vacation." She expressed with a hint of amusement. Ron visibly softened as he let out a silent sigh. He tensed a moment later and eyed the unyielding Ginny suspiciously.

"Don't tell me there's another one?" he asked exasperatedly.

"Neville." Ron's eyes bulged out of their sockets before he spluttered in dissent. Ginny merely giggled. "Only joking, Ron." The redhead drooped in his seat before Hermione announced they had to head to the prefects cart. Ron wasn't too happy with this either, but he reluctantly followed. Harry seized his best friend's deck of cards and languidly sorted through them before thinking about the trip thus far. Was there any truth behind Ginny's words? Or was she still yanking her brother's chain? He had grown fond of Ginny like a distant sister, but it wasn't his right to take on the protectiveness like her true older brothers. Sometimes he wondered if Ginny truly knew her brothers only defended her not because she was the youngest, but the only female. He mused that if there was another Weasley girl, neither would be able to slip out with a boy before they encountered their brothers.

Neville, Dean, Seamus, and various other Defense Association members stopped by their cart on the trip back to Hogwarts. It was a silent one, as Hermione and Ron were gone for most of the time. Harry almost missed their arguing. But not quite. He had bought a round of sweets from the plump lady with the trolley and saved them for his friends, and Ginny and Luna bought some for themselves. The sun streamed brightly into their cart, illuminating the snoozing owls and napping feline, its warm rays heat the cart's occupants comfortably. An hour before the trip ended, Hermione and Ron returned, Ron a bit eager and tired, and Hermione strangely perky. The boys took their robes and uniforms to a nearby cart (with Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Terry Boot) and changed quickly, Ron and Ernie pinning their prefect badges on the fronts of their robes. Ron seemed a bit jittery and hopped in place.

"Oy, can you believe it Harry? In a few hours we'll be meeting the Celestials! Wow, it's so bizarre...." He rambled on.

"It's a great educational opportunity," Ernie droned in his superior tone. "Especially for the DA, you know." Harry furrowed his brows at Macmillan's words. He hadn't thought about it—inviting the Celestials in the group. The Gryffindor supposed it would've come to him in school, or Hermione would have informed him, but now it seemed obvious. "That is, if you are continuing it, of course."

"Of course, Harry's continuing it." Ron answered for the boy. The others nodded excitedly and the Gryffindors took their leave. The girls were fully dressed and when Harry looked for his missing owl cage, Hermione explained they sent it to be delivered with the luggage. Luna interestedly picked small tufts of ginger hair from the seats where Crookshanks previously lay, examining them carefully. The nervous teens said nothing to each other as the train lurched to a stop. The sun was still bright outside, and Harry couldn't help but notice the trip seemed a bit faster than normal. They had left an hour earlier than usual; the students customarily arrived at seven, and it was usually very dark by then. Now, glancing at Hermione's watch, Harry noted it was a little more than five. The five entered the corridor and walked through the narrow ways to the nearest exit. Several short first years spilled out before them, glancing nervously around the foreign place. Finally making it outside, Harry and company smiled at the familiar voice and face of the dearest friend.

"Firs' years!" Hagrid bellowed at the top of his voice. "Firs' years'll follow'n me!" In his silhouette against the lowered sun, Hagrid waved a platter-sized hand at the three. "All righ', you three?" he asked over the din of voices from the older years. What was visible of his face was his cherry-tinted nose, cheeks and forehead, his beetle-black eyes glinting kindly. His long, tangled hair and beard draped over his moleskin coat, and his face still looked a bit trodden and beaten. No doubt the handy work of the Care of Magical Creatures' half-brother giant, Grawp. They nodded and waved back, Luna and Ginny leading them to a nearby carriage.

The vast, midnight-toned, skeletal thestrals, with their haunting white eyes and massive leathery wings watched the students carefully. Harry thought they looked worse in the sunlight than in the darkness, when he usually observed them. But to the other students of Hogwarts, the carriages were magically whisked to the castle; to them, the great beast seen by a select few young eyes, is nothing but empty air. He gave the sickly looking beast one last look before hopping into the carriage last. As he shut the door, the stagecoach staggered to life, leading them and other students to the school safely. Everyone sat in introspective silence as the carriage swayed and stumbled against various rocks and gravel. Harry watched as Luna toyed with her dirty-blond braid before something crossed his mind.

"Haven't seen Malfoy or his babysitters today." Ginny looked at him before answering.

"Saw him earlier this morning as I was looking for a compartment. He was by himself. I expect he came extremely early." She reported. Harry nodded thoughtfully.

"D'you think his father is out of Azkaban?" Hermione snorted at Harry's query.

"Of course, Harry. It's Lucius Malfoy." She stated as if he didn't know who Draco's father was. "A little money here, a plea stating he was under the Imperious Curse again, and he's as free as the air." Of course; Lucius could never stay rightfully behind bars. He'd always find a way to slither out of situations, using his money, name, and power to his advantage. Yes: it's so hard to see where Draco had learned it all....

The wagon came to an abrupt stop and Ron pushed the door open, letting himself and the girls out first. Harry, who had been closest to the door, stepped out of the small space and watched as the thestral snorted, shaking its head faintly. Luna smiled at the thestral and at the staring Harry before following Ginny inside the castle. Hermione, Ron, and Harry hung behind them, avidly searching the crowds for any sign of their new schoolmates. Harry curled his lips in disgust when he spotted a familiar mane of blonde hair.

Draco Malfoy ascended the stone castle steps, flanked by his henchmen, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Behind them, Pansy Parkinson hung on the Slytherin's heels, scowling at anyone who came within feet of the quartet. They entered the school without a backward glance to anyone. Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan were walking alongside Susan Bones, Owen Cauldwell, and Zacharias Smith, trailing the sixth year Slytherins. Ron and Hermione had seen Malfoy and the others enter the castle and Ron scrunched his face in confusion.

"Crabbe and Goyle still go here? I was so sure they'd fail out of Hogwarts...." He mumbled more to himself than to his friends. His prefect counterpart gave him a weak frown before entering the entrance hall. A childlike smile swept across Harry's face as he took in the ornate entrance hall of Hogwarts, the place he had come to call his home. Walking beside his best friends toward the Great Hall, Harry slapped Ron amiably on the back.

"Some things never ch...."

The Boy-Who-Lived couldn't be more wrong.

Eyes widened and students ceased all actions as their eyes fell upon the Great Hall.

At least they assumed so.

The Great Hall, though unchanged from exterior view, was expanded greatly. It was as if they added another hall onto it. The tables were stretched much, much longer than usual, and from afar Harry could see the head table was also accommodated to fit more people. School and house banners alternatively hung over their particular tables, and the golden plates and utensils glistened spotlessly in the light of the thousand or so candles. The enchanted

ceiling showed a sunny sky, though the blue was replaced by lighter orange and yellow. Harry noted the candles had small silver and gold vines wrapped around them, hanging decoratively above the heads of the students. After every detail had been meticulously inspected, the students entered the Great Hall to their tables.

"You were saying, mate?" Ron amusedly questioned his friend. If the dining hall had to be extended this much, who knew what else in the castle had been enlarged to fit the new arrivals? Hermione was busy observing everything keenly, her chocolate eyes broad, a thirst for knowledge pulsing behind them.

"Must've taken loads of charms, like the Expansion Charm—we're due to learn that one this year. Oh, and the Extension Spell on these tables..." she babbled to an unhearing Harry and Ron. Ginny sat beside them and examined the hall again.

"So, it's really happening," she affirmed. "The Celestials are real. And they're coming here. It's all true..." Ron shook his head in disbelief.

"And it took you an expanded hall just to prove to you they're real?" he kidded. "I'd hate to see what kind of proof you'd want from the Easter bunny—a sampling of his fur sprinkled in fairy dust?" Ginny ignored her brother as everyone took their seats. Across the table, ten bodies down from them, a shout was heard.

"Hey, Harry!" Dean called over Seamus' head. "I like the hair!" Several heads from various houses turned to analyze Harry's short hairstyle. He nervously nodded to Dean and stared at his plate. When he glanced at the Ravenclaw table, Cho gave him an optimistic smile to which he returned halfheartedly. Under the stares—and few glares from certain Slytherins—Harry willed himself not to flush in embarrassment. He himself was not used to his hair being so short, but at least it was long enough to conceal his jagged scar. The side room door in the hall opened and the professors spilled out of it, sitting at their respective places at the head table. Snape sat a few seats down from Dumbledore, and beside him was a young man he had never seen.

He wore robes of tan plaid, and his hair was a full russet color. He had a clean beard, clipped to perfection, a mustache above his upper lip, and his sideburns connecting with his brown beard. The



male had a rugged look to him, as if he had traveled much and carried a vast burden. A weary, yet attentive look presented itself in his watchful brown orbs, eyeing the hall carefully. The man looked refined and well-mannered beside the scowling Snape.

"Suppose that's the new defense teacher, eh?" Ron asked him.

"Probably." Hermione answered. Tiny squeals of delight were heard from Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil a few Gryffindors down, as they took time from their gossiping to survey the new professor. Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I know those looks. They did the same thing when they were all chatty of Professor Firenze." It was no secret many of the females at Hogwarts thought the centaur was incredibly handsome. It now seemed as if the four-legged, half-man, half-steed had competition as more and more girls took interest in the hawk-eyed professor. Ginny raised an eyebrow at her close friend.

"I don't know, Hermione. He is quite dashing." Ron threw his sister a hard look.

"What, thinking about making him your next fling?"

"I'm quite sure there are rules against such things, Ron." Harry joked from beside the boy. The male prefect sulked in his seat before the doors of the Great Hall opened. Everyone fell silent as the apprehensive first years, led by Professor McGonagall, walked into the massive Great Hall in two lines, two students to each row, Hagrid bringing up the rear. McGonagall gripped a four-legged stool in one hand, and a scroll and tattered hat in the second. It was hard to believe everyone in this very hall—teachers included—were that small at one time. Harry shuddered as he imagined himself at that age, frightened and restlessly waiting for his sorting. As Hagrid took his place at the head table, McGonagall put the stool in the middle of the front, placing the tattered, beaten hat on top of it. The students waited with bated breath as the wizard hat twitched and a tear formed above the brim of the hat.

Harry, for the first time since he had been at Hogwarts, completely tuned out the Sorting Hat's yearly song as it crooned its practiced limerick. Last year, it had warned them to stand united against the threat against the wizarding world, commonly known as Voldemort. While others tentatively listened to the hat, Harry's wandering

emerald eyes bounced over the students in the hall. Luna was tapping her feet to the hat's song, humming along, lost in her own eccentric world; Zacharias Smith leaned on his hands, trying to keep from falling asleep; back at the Ravenclaw table, Michael Corner sat beside Cho Chang, his hand clasped on hers. Harry didn't feel the slightest bit jealous. In fact, a feeling of utter relief washed over him. The Asian seeker now had another's kiss to ruin with her tears. He idly wondered if he should warn Michael about needing tissues or handkerchiefs on all of their dates: it wouldn't hurt to prepare the boy.

Draco sat in boredom between Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini at Serpent Country. Crabbe and Goyle's hulking gorilla forms were turned to the group of first years, and they cracked the knuckles threateningly. Neville sat beside Colin and Dean, his face slack and somnolent. Everyone seemed especially bored through the sorting since they didn't have to go through it again. Harry's peripatetic reveries were broken by a burst of applause. The hat's song was finally over. He glanced at Hermione's watch and read five twenty-one.

"When I call out your name," McGonagall began, "you will place the hat on your head, and be sorted into one of the four houses." She unfurled a scroll of parchment she was gripping in her hand, and read the first name. "Ackerley, Megan." A small girl with long brunette hair nervously scooted to the bench and placed the hat over her head. Stewart Ackerley, her older brother, craned his neck to watch his sister's sorting. After a few seconds, her fate was decided.

"RAVENCLAW!" the table erupted into cheers, and Megan raced over to the clever house of the eagle.

"Benetton, Jennifer."

"GRYFFINDOR!" the table cheered for its first new member, before Harry could see Dennis Creevey patting the newcomer on her back. Many more students were sorted into the houses, earning proud applause from their new housemates. After Oscar Gobleton was sorted into Hufflepuff, McGonagall glanced at the list for the next name.

"Goyle, Geneva." A puffy young first year with curly brown hair shoved the hat on and sat on the stool. The Gryffindor sixth years

threw each other questioning looks before watching the sorting of Goyle's little sister.

"Goyle has a sister?" Ron whispered exasperatedly.

"Obviously." Ginny hissed at him in knowing.

"What a nightmare." Ron responded, looking visibly sick.

"SLYTHERIN!" The table clapped fiercely for their newest member, Goyle smiling dumbly at his sibling. Ron rubbed his temples a bit before commenting.

"Really, did they need a hat to tell them which house she would go into?" He asked as Mary Ickleberry calmly sat under the hat to await her sorting.

"You never know. Family can be sorted differently. Look at Parvati and her sister." Hermione pointed out.

"Knotweather, Feagan." A lanky first year with ink-black hair placed the aged thinking cap on his head.

"Yeah, one is silly and the other snobbish." Ron answered bitterly. "Still, you can just tell sometimes when one belongs in—"

"SLYTHERIN!" Knotweather trudged to his cheering table. Hermione looked at Ron challengingly, and eyed the next student.

"Okay." She conceded smoothly. "Sort the next student." Ron raised an eyebrow as 'Littenburg, Louise' took her turn. Ron seemed a bit pensive, eyeing the blonde-haired child carefully.

"She looks like a Hufflepuff." He declared quietly. Harry tilted his head.

"Dunno...more Ravenclaw to me."

"RAVENCLAW!" Ron scowled at Harry's triumphant grin. Hermione shook her head.

"This next one's a Slytherin," he nodded affirmatively. "That's a given." Elisabeth Nott, thin, pale and sandy-haired like her brother,

was indeed the next Slytherin. The sorting went on for another few minutes and ended when 'Yellowfeller, Quinn' became a Hufflepuff. As the applause receded, McGonagall took the hat and stool away as Professor Dumbledore stood to address the students. There were considerable amounts of space left at each table, enough for another house to fill. With the ever-present twinkle and a grandfatherly smile, Dumbledore began.

"I would like to welcome you to another year at Hogwarts School, and trust that our new first years will find everything considerably easier within their new families. However, there will be a time for making such lengthy, boring, yet necessary speeches," he smiled warmly at the snickering students. "But it will be after our guests have arrived." Low murmurs of excitement from students became a collective loud buzz as Dumbledore paused. Conversation ceased and the headmaster continued. "As you all well know, Aripedes Academy of Celestuality will be remaining with us for the year. The students and professors will be arriving soon, and as a school, we will collectively greet them. While here, they will become family much like those in your houses remain; so it is imperative you all respect each other, and create lasting bonds of trust and friendship. We will be meeting them in the front, so if you would please make your way to the entrance hall, and your head of house will set you accordingly."

Noises were heard as the students stood and exited the hall. Colin, the newest male prefect for Gryffindor, led the Gryffindor first years along with another female Harry didn't know. Ron, Hermione, Harry and Ginny all followed their house back out to the entrance hall, rushing Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs mixing with their house.

"How d'you think they're coming? Broomsticks? Train? Flying house? Ship?" Ron suggested.

"Not sure." Was all Hermione responded. Professor McGonagall called for her house to line up along a section of the stone stairway, making sure the first years were in the front. Harry and company stood in a good spot, able to see over everyone else's heads and view the vast green space of open land. The Quidditch Pitch stood far in the corner, and Hagrid's hut seemed but a mere pebble from their distance. Small, white tufts of clouds gathered on the grounds, foreboding signs of a slight fog forming tonight. On the end opposite Gryffindor, Snape was lecturing his Slytherins on something, and

Harry noticed the faintest of awed smirks plastered across Malfoy's pallid face. Most of the professors, after straightening the lines of students and forcing them to adjust their cloaks, stood at the back, patiently waiting for the arrival of the Celestials.

"Do you think they'll be riding in the clouds?" Ginny asked, squinting in the distance. The sky had turned a faint orange, bordering on white.

"We'll see, Ms. Weasley." Dumbledore stated gently, circling the group of students before taking his place in the lone part between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Professor Flitwick had called for the students to form a respectable path for the students and professors, shifting everyone closer.

"Think they'll be riding an animal or thestrals?" Ginny questioned.

"We don't know, Ginny." Ron rolled his eyes at his sister. "Bloody hell, when did you become so inquiring?"

"I'm your sister. You tell me." The words rolled off her tongue without her skipping a beat. Ron shook his head annoyingly before falling in a meditative state.

"D'you—"

"No, Ron." Hermione interrupted jadedly. Ron gave her an incredulous look.

"You didn't even know what I was going to say."

"It was another absurd question you most likely already know the answer to." She answered scanning the grounds and skies.

"You don't know that."

"Try me." Ron seemed a bit apprehensive.

"Think they can apparate?"

"Point proven." Hermione glanced at Harry. Ron's ears flushed embarrassingly pink and he focused his attention on the emerald grounds. Harry adjusted his spectacles and eyed the scene carefully.

The young wizard vaguely wondered how his godfather was faring. He would've loved to have this opportunity, were he Harry's age. McGonagall was talking to the new professor, and Ginny and Ron were hurling possibilities of travel at each other. Harry saw an eerie mask of fog roll over the hills just over the horizon.

"Strange fog, isn't it?" Ron leaned over and whispered. Harry, Hermione and Ginny concurred. The fog swept over the lush hills and was quickly covering the grounds. It moved communally, gathering in clumps, but leaving no view of the grass beneath it.

"It's moving kind of quick, isn't it?" the others murmured their agreements. Harry's hand slipped to his wand and he grasped it just for chary measure. This was no normal fog. Normal fog didn't move this way. It was almost as if it was...well...human. It was then part of the fog shifted and moved restlessly. Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"That isn't fog..." As the so-called cloud approached the castle rapidly, Harry made out indistinct shapes in the cloud. Triangular, slightly curved. They looked like hundreds of fins. Shark fins. Moving closer and closer, heading straight for them. Looming closer, the shark fins had moving people on them.

"It's them!" exclaimed Parvati. "The Celestials! They're here!" She pointed at the cloud. Many students exclaimed at this, while others stared fixedly at the moving cloud of fins. He could just barely make out the trunks and luggage attached behind the maneuvering riders; they were coming up the side of the lake. A slow smile spread over the faces of Hogwarts. So, this was it.

"Wicked." Ron spoke in awe.

"Too right, mate." The group of Celestials moved fluidly over the lawns of Hogwarts, gripping something tightly to keep their balance and maintain control.

"What are they riding?" Ginny asked.

"Looks like a Muggle sail, only smaller." Dean answered.

All too soon, the group was sloping up the hill to greet the assembled students, standing dumbly in wonderment at the Celestials before them. They could feel the power radiating from the

group of Greeks, not all of it positive power. The leaders of the groups were young students, and they leaned back slightly to slow their speed. After the braking of the students, those behind them halted, starting a chain reaction of braking, spreading through the group. The front line, which led the students, had an array of pupils, all of which were wearing small, but incredibly shiny badges on their robes.

"Prefects." Whispered Hermione in awe. "They have prefects...." Ron merely scrunched his face in pity.

"Even they can't escape it."

The students all wore satin black robes with a colored Aripedes crest, with four animals and a rope of vine underneath the coat of arms. The eight students in the front wore varying colors of badges, some violet, others, blue, there were white ones and orange ones. In the front, the eight students were sharp-eyed and intrigued by the array of wizards and witches assembled before them, each race staring at each other with something akin to interest.

The first student, a male with pitch-black hair, and icy hazel eyes, raised an eyebrow at his companion, a female with straw colored hair and dull blue-green eyes. A Black male, barely bald with a bright smile greeted them in nodding, his friend, a spiky, light ginger-haired male with startling blue topaz eyes, exuded an aura of satisfaction and anticipation. Next to the redhead was an Asian girl with dark-rimmed eyeglasses, her black hair pulled into a high ponytail. She looked a bit sick from the ride, but held it in well. As Harry was studying the other three prefects, a strange image emerged before his very green eyes.

It was like someone had thrown a stone in completely still water to disrupt the surface. In an instant, several colorfully-robed adults appeared in front of the Celestial prefects. This rippling effect was startling, causing a few of the first years to gasp in terror or amazement—Harry couldn't tell.

"I thought you said no one could apparate on school grounds!" Ron hissed at Hermione, a somewhat exultant pitch in his voice. For the first time, the clever witch was at a loss for words, her mouth opening and closing as if to reply, her face reddening when she recognized she had none. Harry cogitated Hermione would most

likely spend a few extra hours in the library researching this new discovery just to prove the redhead wrong.

A man in dark gray and indigo robes beamed toothily at the young wizards-in-training, his long, shorter-than-shoulder-length black hair swinging as he climbed the empty stair space, his perfectly trimmed black beard sprouting few wisps of gray. The burly man greeted the headmaster of Hogwarts with an embrace only long time friends could pull off. They murmured a few words to each other and the middle-aged, bronze-skinned man with the beard laughed. Dumbledore clasped his hands together and his blue eyes twinkled at the group of young Celestials.

"Aripedes Academy, Students of Celestuality," Albus Dumbledore spoke, his young, ecstatic voice betraying his true age, "Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

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A/N: Revised chapter.



## Chapter Seven: Band of Brothers

Young wizards and Celestials exchanged nervous glances as Professor Dumbledore welcomed the students and professors to Hogwarts.

"I warmly welcome all to our humble institution of magical education, and expect that you are all weary from your long journey out of Olympus. More will be said," his eyes twinkled warmly at the students. "But I find the sun falling quickly. Were I to make a speech on these steps, we would find ourselves not only asleep, but also encircled in darkness. If you will kindly follow the instructions of your professors, we may dismiss to the Great Hall for our welcoming feast. Headmaster Chiron?" Dumbledore turned to the man beside him with the dark head of hair. With an accepting smile, Chiron faced his uneasy students. They shifted slightly, glancing back and forth between their headmaster and the wizards and witches craning their necks to see them.

"Students, please detach your trunks and animals." He ordered lightly. Loud shifting was heard as the young Celestials complied with their headmaster. "Professors, if you would kindly assist those students in need, and Virgil, please take care of their belongings?" An older-looking, portly, bald man with black eyes and faded blue robes nodded enthusiastically, collecting trunks from the weird transport vehicles and stacking them accordingly. Many professors moved to help the students, unlatching the luggage and handing it to the bald man.

"Argus, can help, Alekos," Dumbledore spoke to the Celestial headmaster. "As it is, he knows where most of the luggage for the students are stored." An odd look crossed Chiron's face as he looked at Dumbledore.

"Argus still works here? Thought he'd long gone already..." he stated, shrugging gracefully. Dumbledore called for the trudging Filch, and together he and the one called Virgil stacked trunks and animal cages together. Ron nudged Harry as a few professors from Aripedes pulled out familiar slender rods from their robes.

"They've got wands?" he whispered. "How've they got wands?" Harry merely shrugged and continued to watch them at work. Both headmasters were chatting amiably in silent tones, while the

Hogwarts professors surveyed the rest of the scene in silence. Virgil and Filch stacked the last of the trunks and cages, Filch speaking in growling tones to the Being. The bald man nodded to Chiron and the headmaster smiled.

"Students, please banish your riders." Before his very eyes, Harry watched as hundreds upon hundreds of the small triangular sails disappeared in small flashes of white light, leaving only the black-cloak clad students. When all of the transports were gone, Headmaster Chiron whispered something to Dumbledore, to which the older man expressed a wrinkled smile and nodded. "Heads of houses of both Hogwarts and Aripedes, I bid you attention." Harry noticed Snape stood straighter and McGonagall pursed her lips. Professor Flitwick settled between the Ravenclaw first years, which were all much taller than he.

"As there are the four famed houses of Hogwarts, so it is with Aripedes Academy. By the friendships forged between our eight founders, each house of Aripedes is counterpart to those of Hogwarts. We sincerely hope you will find friendships with your new housemates. Gryffindor," he started. The Gryffindors found themselves nervous and standing upright. Harry nervously waited as the man eyed his students and the wizards respectively. "Your new housemates are those of Paraffin." McGonagall bowed her head and the Gryffindors gave quirky grins. Harry forced himself to smile at the group of students. They all looked the same, with their black robes with the Aripedes crest. How were they to know who the Paraffins were? Ron voiced his thoughts quietly.

"They all look the same. How do we know who's who?"

"I don't know." Hermione answered, glancing around in confusion.

"You know, you've been saying that a lot lately." He commented to the scowling witch.

"Hufflepuff," Chiron continued, "your housemates are those of Brittlebore house." The Hufflepuffs beamed and nodded, but Harry could see they were just as baffled as the Gryffindors in finding out which people they would befriend. "Ravenclaw, you will find great partners in Voltaire." The Ravenclaws nodded in respect, their eyes giving away their puzzlement. "And Slytherin," the Serpent House stiffened, keeping on cool expressions. "May you find cunning and

friendship with the house of Aves. Harry noted Malfoy's smirk and Snape's slight nod. The dark-haired Celestial in the front gave his blonde companion another look, before raising his eyebrow at the Slytherins.

"Heads of houses, if you will please meet briefly to greet each other, while Professor Chiron and I converse." Dumbledore eyed his heads of house quickly.

"Professor McGonagall," a formidable looking female ascended the steps, her wizened face and hazel eyes wildly accenting her gray hair, which was in a tight bun. She wore velvet robes of navy, and a silver brooch was pinned on the front. As she passed Harry, she smiled in a business-like way, before reaching her destination. "Minerva, it's been years...." She greeted McGonagall with a warm grin.

"It truly has, Alcina. It truly has...." Harry, Ron and Hermione watched the exchange, as well as the other heads of houses meeting. An elderly, short, Asian man with a long mane of silky white hair (with a thin, kempt beard rivaling Dumbledore's) knelt before Professor Flitwick, shaking hands with the dwarf of a professor; a short, fat, professor of Latin descent shook porky hands with Professor Sprout, who had just moved down the stone steps; a dark looking man with jet-black hair reaching his chin, but slicked back and a neat beard grasped hands firmly with Professor Snape on the other end. The two looked like dark shadows in their black robes.

"Boy," whispered Ginny. "When he said 'counterparts,' he really wasn't joking." Harry agreed with Ginny; the heads of houses complimented each other very well—he'd thought the head of Paraffin house was another version of McGonagall. And with longer greasy hair, a bigger nose, and removal of the beard, the counterpart Slytherin head of house could have easily been another Snape.

Harry took this time to study the vivid crests on the Celestials' robes. From his place, he could identify four animals: a violet and silver hawk, a black and white lemur, what seemed to be an orange and yellow leopard, and a periwinkle and navy phoenix. He surmised them to most likely be the house animals of Aripedes. Squinting a bit harder, he read the words etched in a gold ribbon under the crest:

'Patiens Caelestes Semper Prosperitas Infissum.' The Gryffindor seeker would have turned to Hermione to ask her to translate it if she could, but the Celestial heads moved back to the silent students at the bottom of the stairs.

"Now that we have gotten to better acquaint ourselves with each other, we shall off to the Great Hall. Professor Chiron?" Dumbledore queried expectantly. The raven-haired headmaster looked to the students in the front.

"Sixth year prefects, please lead your Celestial houses behind those of Hogwarts. Follow them closely. Seventh year prefects, assume the rear. Fifth year prefects, help where you can." Chiron instructed. There was a clamor of voices and footsteps as Hufflepuff left first, their Brittlebore complements trailing them with whispers. Ravenclaw followed them, with the Celestials known as Voltaires, Harry noticing the Asian Entity with spectacles leading with her blonde female partner.

"Oy, Malfoy's taking this pretty seriously." Ron prodded Harry in the rib to watch the Slytherin prefect. Malfoy was shining and adjusting his bottle green prefect badge, Pansy doing the same. Snape lead his Slytherins back into the castle, both the Slytherins and Aves following in his stead. The head of house for Aves brought up the rear of the Beings and Entities. Several of the Aripedes and Hogwarts professors walked with the students, making sure they assembled quickly into the Great Hall. Finally, McGonagall called for the Gryffindor seventh year prefects to lead the first years and rest of the house back to the Great Hall. Harry obeyed, but occasionally glanced back to watch the remaining Paraffins budge along the lawn and up the steps. The ginger-haired male and his dark-skinned friend surveyed the group behind them before following a few fourth years up the steps.

"Bloody hell," exclaimed Ron. "They're our counterparts." Hermione shot him a knowing look.

"Obviously, Ron. D'you think they'll actually be in the dormitories with us?" she asked of her friends. Harry, Ron and Ginny shrugged.

"Dunno. Expect we'll find out from Dumbledore." He replied. The four whispered various theories to each other as they made it back to the Great Hall. Upon entry, Harry had come to realize he had

never seen the dining hall so full; the wizards and Celestials sat comfortably at the extremely long tables, enough room to fit more. Chancing a quick glance around the hall, Harry noted many of the Hufflepuffs integrated themselves with the Celestials, mixing both races throughout the table. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott encased a Being and an Entity, both of which had shiny orange badges. Malfoy and Parkinson sat with the black-haired boy and blonde girl Harry had spotted earlier at the front of the arriving Celestials, both of which seemed slightly tense between the Slytherins. Ron followed his gaze.

"Ah. And here I thought all Slytherins were fond of each other." He squinted at the Slytherin/Aves quartet. "If I didn't know better, I'd say those Celestials weren't really enjoying themselves." Harry simply nodded before sitting between Hermione and Ron. The Celestials had trailed behind them, filling in empty spots where they could. Parvati and Lavender spoke in hushed tones to an Entity beside them; Dean and Seamus spoke with a muscularly built, tanned Being across from them; even Neville nervously started a conversation with a beautiful brunette girl who was giggling gaily. The young Gryffindor eyed Ginny, a few housemates away from him, merrily chatting with what seemed to be three identical Celestial triplet girls, not much other than second year.

"She makes friends fast, don't you think?" Harry asked Ron. The prefect looked at his sister and nodded.

"I expect it's because she grew up around all brothers, without a sister to share things with." Hermione suggested. Ron quickly looked at his plate and said nothing.

"Do you think we'll be able to make friends with them as quickly as she?" Harry questioned, seriously doubting it would take less than ten seconds. Ron gazed upward to answer, but was cut off.

"Here's our big chance." He whispered. Harry vaguely wondered what his best friend was talking about before six Celestials took seats opposite them, smiling confidently. He recognized two as the boys on the front row, but the other four he couldn't place. As he turned to furtively study the unknown four, he thought one of the boys looked familiar. He had curly brown hair and light freckles sprinkling his face. But he just couldn't place him. The other boy sat beside the Black prefect, and had short, wavy blonde hair and eager

brown eyes. The medium-sized girl beside him had straight blonde hair, barely brushing her shoulders, and bright chocolate eyes. He would've studied the last girl longer, but by then the professors had assembled and taken their seats at the head table. It seemed so full of life, now that there were several more bodies. Headmaster Chiron sat to one side of Professor Dumbledore, and McGonagall in her usual seat at his side. Hogwarts' headmaster rose, earning silence from the chatting teenagers in the hall. His eyes twinkling proudly, glinting sheer happiness, he raised his arms in a gesture of welcome.

"Colleagues, students...friends, I welcome you once more to Hogwarts School." Applause was met by the students, and ceased just as quickly. "I speak the truth when I say I never would have expected for the schools to be reunited after quite some time. Though the euphoric emotion stirs within me, I must attest to the fact that students always retain knowledge and information of some sort when their stomachs are full." Ron's stomach gave a quiet rumble of accord as its owner patted it genially.

"Well said, Dumbledore. Now, on with the feast." He whispered, earning sniggers not only from Harry, but also from the Celestials across from them. Hermione's scowl at the prefect only served to further their snickers.

"So I beseech you, eat to your hearts content, and make a fresh comrade while you stuff your eager faces. Let the feast of alliances, begin." Food immediately appeared before the starving students, and Harry was impressed; the house elves must have worked especially hard tonight, and probably will all night. There were roasts of all kind, including pork, chicken, and beef. Potatoes, rice, vegetables, pastas, gravy...it was all here. Even a few dishes he had never seen in his life looked scrumptious. The Celestials sat unfazed as the food appeared, as though they had seen it many times before. Ron quickly dove into the food, showing no uncertainty before their guests. And even they didn't mind. Hermione looked at the Gryffindor keeper in disgust before primly eating her food.

"Honestly, Ron. You've no class." She condemned, slicing her mutton. Ron licked a bit of potato from the corner of his jaw.

"Oh, lay off Hermione. We've only eaten sweets all day, and that bloody prefect meeting lasted forever. You expect me to hold back when I see food? Have you ever known me to hold back?" He

retorted. She frowned at him for beginning an argument in the presence of future greatness. The Celestials merely looked on in interest.

"Well, at least eat civilly and not like swine."

"Says you, eating like a bloody pigeon."

"Food's pretty good today, wouldn't you say?" Harry cut off Hermione's impending snarky comment. Ron unceremoniously ripped off a piece of flesh from a chicken leg.

"Ouh bet." He swallowed the chicken seconds later. "The elves've outdone themselves." Hermione glared at Ron before vigorously carving into her cutlet. He rolled his eyes.

"You're not still on about that 'spew,' thing, Hermione! You've met loads of elves who—"

"It—is—not—'spew'!" she hissed.

"Sorry. You've not given up on S.P.E.W.?" he queried tiredly. The blonde-haired Entity across from Hermione perked up.

"What's S.P.E.W.?" her soft voice intoned. Hermione brightened at the prospect of another member.

"It's some organization she's started to free house elves." Ron rambled uninterestedly while spooning more potatoes onto his plate. The girl cocked her head to the side looking between the two. "Though the resident genius of the school, she still can't seem to figure out the fact the elves are happy with working." The female prefect scrunched her face in irritation, before smiling at the girl.

"I'm Hermione Granger." She introduced. The Entity smiled.

"I'm Nikola. Nikola Smythe." Ron's fork clattered loudly against the gold salver. Harry narrowed his eyes slightly at the girl before looking to his best friend. But Ron wasn't looking at him. He was staring wide-eyed at the girl.

"You...you're...are you related to...Spiridon Smythe?" he asked. Harry's thoughts rushed back to the mysterious black-haired, blue eyed man he assumed was a wizard. The girl nodded suspiciously.

"You know our father?" she asked. Hermione lowered her eyebrows.

"Our?" she asked. Nikola pointed to the boy beside her with wavy blonde hair and brown eyes. It made sense; they looked completely alike. They had to be brother and sister, though they looked nothing like Spiridon. The redheaded Paraffin prefect locked eyes with Harry. Silence passed between the two for a few seconds as Harry felt odd. Not a bad odd, but a warm, friendly odd. As if he had seen the boy before, or even knew him. The Paraffin blinked, a smile creeping over his face.

"I'm Kaltagonus Smythe. And these are my twin brother and sister, Nikola and Starbuck. We're triplets." He stated. His blue eyes were striking, and his light ginger hair messy, but stylish, like Harry's, and he glanced at Ron and Hermione. Ron had a slight apprehensive look on his face, Hermione's face identical to his.

"I know," said the wavy-haired boy. "He looks nothing like us. He inherited some weird traits from our father's side."

"Speaking of which, how do you know him?" Nikola inquired. "Celestials and wizards had no contact with each other for years." The trio glanced nervously at each other. Surely they couldn't tell these strangers about the Order. Even if they were Spiridon Smythe's children.

"Our parents," Hermione half-truthed.

"We've met." Ron ended. This seemed to satisfy the Beings and Entities as they went back to the feast and conversations. "So your father's a Celestial."

"Yeah." Starbuck answered, chewing on pork.

"I'm Ron Weasley, by the way."

"This is Icarus Inigo," Kaltagonus' introduced the young Black prefect. "And Yorick Kaenslar." This was the curly brown haired boy on Kaltagonus' other side.



"Well, Kaltagonus..."

"Call me Kaltag." He requested. Harry nodded nervously. Was he as much as a hero in their world as he was in the wizarding world?

"Harry Potter." Kaltag smiled warmly.

"Nice to meet you, Harry Potter." Harry was relieved they didn't scan his fringe for his famous scar. Kaltag languidly chewed his roast beef, taking a quick peek at the head table. Harry absently followed his gaze to focus on the professors.

Dumbledore was chatting with Headmaster Chiron, the two making wild gestures with their utensils; McGonagall and the one called 'Alcina' composedly carried on conversation, tittering lightly and blushing. Hagrid was talking to a thin male, with wild, short gray hair and olive skin; on the other side of Chiron, a young, dirty-golden haired male spoke animatedly with the sullen-faced, sulky Aves head of house. Snape sat near him, neither saying much to one another. Kaltag emitted a light chuckle at the scene of their professors, acting very human. Nikola and Hermione started on a long conversation about elf rights, and Ron had taken quickly to Icarus and Starbuck. Yorick conversed with Dean and Seamus, with Neville adding his commentary. Harry swirled his potatoes, reflecting on the day thus far. His back didn't hurt anymore since his fall earlier this morning, and he was truly grateful for Mad-Eye's potions. The ride to Hogwarts was rather uneventful; the only thing gnawing at Harry's mind was the arrival of the Beings. What were they riding on, and why didn't they use a train or some other form of transportation?

Dessert appeared after the plates were cleared, and Harry chose his token treacle tart. Other foreign pies, pastries and sweets were spread out along the table, which the Celestials quickly dove into. Different thoughts flitted across his mind, mostly about their new housemates. They were born from Celestials; and Celestials was a watered-down term for 'Greek gods and goddesses.' Surely there was some truth behind the famed Celestials of mythology. If there was such a race as Celestials, then there must have been reality in the individuals.

"Er...Kaltag?" He asked uncertainly. Blue eyes met Harry's emerald ones.

"Harry?" he mockingly called. They smiled in hilarity before Harry settled down confidently. Thousands of questions hurled about his mind, but he didn't want to burden Kaltag with all of these questions. As if he could sense Harry's dilemma, Kaltag raised an eyebrow.

"You have anything to ask me?" he queried. Harry scoffed, taking in another spoon of his tart.

"I have thousands of questions." He murmured. Kaltag nodded in understanding. A few seats down, Dean was avidly chatting about football.

"You don't know where to start, huh?" it came out as more of a statement than a question.

"Right in one." Harry confirmed. Kaltag bobbed his head in pensiveness before he concluded.

"Okay, let's start with the basics." He suggested. "I'm Kaltag Smythe, a proud member of Paraffin house, a prefect, I'm seventeen, a sixth year, and I have siblings. My middle name is Lucien, for my godfather—who I've never met, by the way—and I'm the Being of the Elements." Harry took all this in, filing the information in different sections of his mind.

"Wait—what do you mean, 'Being of the Elements?'" he had no idea what he meant by such a phrase. Kaltag swirled his spook in his pudding.

"It means my forces—or powers—specialize in controlling the elements. Greeks usually phrase it 'so and so, goddess of snarky gits.'" He clarified. The elements....

"So, that means you can control fire, water, air, earth..."

"And create it. I control electricity to some extent, mostly through lightning, and last year, I found out I can control the sun a bit. Not too much, though..." he trailed sadly. Harry nodded, sipping some of his vanilla pudding.

"Reckon it's my turn. I'm Harry Potter, Gryffindor, obviously. I turned sixteen at the end of July; I'm a sixth year, without siblings. I have

this horrible cousin, though. Er...I'm a wizard, seeker for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and my middle name—James—is from my father." He enlightened. The Being of the Elements sat in thoughtful silence, without a doubt surveying the information.

"When's your birthday?"

"July 31st."

"Interesting."

"How so?" Harry munched on a Cauldron Cake.

"That's my birthday." The Boy-Who-Lived choked the cake down quickly, looking at the ginger-haired boy before him.

"Seriously?"

"Get this," Kaltag leaned in closely as if telling a secret. Harry moved forward to listen. "I was born at 11:59 PM July 31st. Nikola and Starbuck were born after midnight on August 1st." Harry and Kaltag sat back up, the former's face etched with curious awe.

"That is interesting." Kaltag nodded, eyeing Harry furtively.

"You've forgotten one fact." He told Harry. The wizard furrowed his brow. How could he have forgotten anything else of importance?

"And that is?" Kaltag rolled his eyes playfully.

"You really must not like fame, then?" he asked, confusing a suspicious Harry even more. Did he know?

"You've lost me."

"Boy-Who-Lived?" Harry's heart sunk a bit. So, this was why they became fast friends. Kaltag watched Harry's reaction and tried to remedy the situation. "Must bite to have so much scrutiny on you." Harry perked up a bit.

"It really does." Kaltag agreed.

"I know. Every time, the Herald is always after me. Starbuck and Nikola get off easier than normal." He mumbled, picking at a pastry. Harry sat straighter. Here was a boy around his age, which was no stranger to fame. And like Harry, he couldn't stand it.

"So why are you so famous?" Kaltag scowled lightly.

"A variety of things. Parents, grandparents, extracurricular activities..." he dangled, playing with a hidden necklace under his robes. Harry raised an eyebrow. "My parents, for instance. Two of the most recognized Celestials throughout Olympus. One is the commander of the highest and most respected Celestial militia in all of Olympus." Harry tried to think back to the time he saw Spiridon at Grimmauld Place. The laid-back, gentle man did not come off as the high-handed, militaristic type. At least the young Being didn't have a crazed Dark Lord after him. "And in the Muggle world, he's well known as a near billionaire." At this, the Being rolled his eyes. Hermione ceased her conversation with Nikola, to stare at Kaltag. A flicker of realization passed over her brown eyes.

"Of course!" she exclaimed. "Smythe Enterprises. Your father is the CEO!" The triplets nodded.

"Though, it's only a cover for their real operations: tracking peculiar Celestial activity and creating innovative technology for Celestial advantage." Starbuck applied knowledgeably. They returned back to their individual conversations.

"So, you're the heir of millions, I take it?" Harry concluded. Kaltag looked nervous. "Something else?"

"My mother," he continued. "Is one of the most famous Entities in Olympus. She is also grandfather's favorite child, and thereby, his heir." Harry tried to piece this information together, to get more from the young Paraffin's scraps.

"And you're firstborn. So, you stand to inherit from both worlds." He decided. Again, the boy hesitantly concurred. This wasn't all. "And...your mother is...?" Kaltag sighed deeply, as if an extremely heavy burden was placed upon his young shoulders.

"Athena." Ron coughed violently after choking on one of the foreign pastries. Hermione thumped him on his back hard, allowing him to breathe.

"That's—that's Harry's..." he breathed deeply, clutching his throat. "Harry's godmother." The Paraffin triplets looked shocked at the information, and Kaltag stared at Harry for a short while. The Boy-Who-Lived quickly digested the rest of his vanilla pudding, trying to keep from commenting on Ron's stupidity.

"Mum always said she had a godson, just never told us he was a wizard." Nikola digressed. She turned back to Hermione. "So, you say the house elves refuse to accept wages....?"

"My godfather is a wizard, you know," Kaltag divulged quietly. "I haven't seen him for years. I don't even remember what he looks like." Harry thought back to his godfather stuck in Grimmauld Place. He wondered what Sirius was doing to pass the time, now that the teenagers were at school. Before Ron could possibly blurt out that Harry's godfather was a known convict, Harry changed the subject.

"Those things you were riding on," he aimed his spoon at Kaltag. "What are they?" The Paraffin prefect smiled brilliantly before answering.

"Those were wind riders, or as we call them, fins."

"Do you normally travel to school in them?" Kaltag shook his head.

"No. We usually use them for Sliatyckx." Harry shook his head in puzzlement.

"I'm sorry, what?" He thought he misheard the boy.

"Sliatyckx. The Celestial sport." Ron, Icarus and Starbuck immediately ceased conversation and avidly joined them in interest.

"You have a sport?"

"Of course," Icarus stated. "What else are we to do, hang around and do homework all weekend?" Ron agreed with Icarus.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"A game, played up in the air on wind riders." At Ron's baffled expression, Starbuck explained to him what they were.

"A wind rider, or fin, is a tool used for travel or more commonly, sport. Its top is shaped like a shark's topmost fin, and in the center of one side is a horizontal bar to hold on to. At the bottom of the wing (the giant shark fin), there is a dense bar attached to an oval board, which we stand on and ride. During a game of Sliatyckx, one may ride oneself off the giant fin and ride horizontally or vertically on the flat, oval board. It's quite fun." Starbuck clarified.

"How is it played?"

"Like your Quidditch, only much more extreme." Icarus expressed.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Well, in Quidditch, you have three basic hoops, all worth ten points, right?" The Black prefect queried. Harry and Ron nodded. "Well, we have three geometric-shaped goals on one single pole. The goals are a circle—worth ten points, a square—worth twenty points, and a triangle, that's thirty points."

"And instead of seven players, we have nine." Starbuck pointed out. Ron looked at the boy curiously.

"Why nine?" Kaltag inhaled deeply, as if preparing himself for a long explanation.

"There are nine players," he began. "One fenzer—"

"Your keeper," Starbuck added.

"Three Sliats—"

"Your chasers..." Icarus continued.

"Four orbers—"

"Your beaters plus two..." Starbuck took over.

"And a seeker."

"...that seeks the Silver Scepter." Icarus finished. Harry open and closed his eyes. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought the three rehearsed this. Icarus, Kaltag, and Starbuck were like Fred and George. He wondered if they were pranksters like Ron's older brothers, but his notion was shot down as he remembered Icarus and Kaltag were prefects.

"What do they do that's unlike us?" asked Ron.

"And why do you have so many orbers?" Harry continued.

"Well, the fenzer guards the three hoops, from the opposing teams Sliats. They use the Sliotaur—"

"Your quaffle..." Starbuck put in.

"—which is bright yellow in color, round, and has this black symmetrical shape on the side. The orbers have a tough job. They have bats—"

"Like your beaters..."

"—and hit the orbs—"

"Your bludgers..."

"—toward the other players. Orbers can hit one through a goal and get ten points out of each hoop. There are four orbs, white in color, one per player. The balls aren't harmless like your bludgers, though..."

"Harmless'?" snorted Kaltag. "Bludgers can be dangerously tricky, mate."

"Yes...but when your bludgers hit a player, do they suck the player into their shadowy white confines?" Starbuck queried. The others looked dumbfounded.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked with trepidation. He didn't like the sound of a bludger not just intent on breaking your bones, but sucking an entire person into it.

"When the orbs touch a player, that player is sucked into the ball. They remain there until the game is over." Icarus clarified. "So, the team continues to play with one less player. It can capture Sliats, Orbers, and sometimes the Fenzers, but it can't touch the Seekers. Depending on which player they have taken, the orbs change to the color of the house they have captured. After that, the orbs can be used to mainly deter your opposition."

"Well...where do they go? After they are...taken?" uttered Ron, uncertain how to phrase his words.

"Just a holding place. We don't really know where it is. We nicknamed it the White Pit, because you're surrounded by white and weird smoke. Until the game ends, that's your temporary home." Icarus reported.

"Which brings us to the seeker." Starbuck continued. Kaltag brightened considerably at his brother's announcement.

"The seeker's job is to find and capture the Silver Scepter. It is small, much like the Golden Snitch, but a bit bigger and silver. It doesn't have wings, but ancient Runic carvings, and it leaves a sparkling silver trail..." Kaltag explained, scooping up some of the Cauldron Cake to appraise it.

"So it's pretty easy to find, right? Just follow the silver trail." Harry stated matter-of-factly, twirling his spoon in his empty saucer.

"Ah, on the contrary...the scepter has the will to turn into any of the balls on the field. It can become the Sliotaur or an orb." Starbuck narrated.

"So there would be an extra Sliotaur on the field, or a fifth orb, and it makes it difficult to find. It can sometimes abandon its silver trail and become another ball, but it must switch back to its original state sometime." Kaltag replied knowingly. "Seekers have this thin, metallic, silver stick, with an open-clawed end. When we're chasing the silver scepter, we catch it with either our hands or the scepter holder of the silver ball. Difficult, but fun. Games can go on for hours, but we've managed to shorten our game times for quite a bit."

"Do you think you'll play it here?" Harry asked. The game was very intriguing. He only hoped he was able to watch one.



"We should," Starbuck spoke.

"We did bring our fins with us, so we have to." Icarus corrected.

"Wow...wicked game." Ron finally spoke. "So what positions do you play?"

"Fenzer." Starbuck proudly stated.

"I'm Orber number two." Icarus grinned.

"Seeker." Kaltag ended.

"Kaltag is assistant captain," Icarus pointed out. "Gills, over there," he gestured to an olive-skinned male with dark brown mid-length hair, sitting nearest to the head table. "Is our captain."

"And I'm assuming you two play Quidditch?" Both Gryffindors nodded.

"Harry's the seeker, and I'm the keeper." Ron presented. "We've got a few members on our team, as mostly all graduated last year."

"Wonder when we can hold try-outs." Harry murmured to himself. He glanced over the Gryffindor table to eye prospects. Sloper and Kirke were a long ways down the table, near the doors. Ginny was giggling madly with the triplet girls, pointing at something in their desserts. Harry's emerald eyes wandered over the hall. The Hufflepuffs and Brittlebores were roaring with laughter and amiability, while the Ravenclaws chortled regally with their Voltaire counters. He noticed the prefects between Draco and Pansy were more relaxed around them now, their cool façades matching the sixth year Slytherin prefects.

"Malfoy's enjoying himself," Hermione stated with slight disgust. "I'd've thought they were hassles to the prefects of Aves." Kaltag turned to follow their gazes and rolled his eyes. Harry didn't ask him anything, but watched the Slytherins carefully. Quite suddenly, the desserts disappeared from their plates, leaving shiny, spotless golden dinnerware. Dumbledore stood up with a wide beam, his blue eyes twinkling in merriment.

"Our stomachs are full, as are our arms linking with our new friends. I trust that now you all will be able to preserve this information from a feeble, old codger such as myself." He kidded. Several sniggers were heard at his comment, and even the professors laughed. With the exception of Snape and the Aves head of house. Kaltag leaned across the table to the Gryffindor trio.

"I like your headmaster. I can see why he and Professor Chiron are such good friends." He murmured.

"As you probably have learned from our young Beings and Entities, we are all human, yes, with exceptional capabilities and a controlled advantage." Dumbledore commenced. Ron leaned forward a bit.

"I've forgotten to ask you," he spoke under his breath. "Why do your professors have wands?"

"We all have wands." Starbuck stated, pulling his slender oak wand from his robes, before tucking it back in the fold of his satin, black robes. Nikola bent forward toward Ron.

"Celestials are basically wizards and witches with a divine purpose and special forces to aid them." She explained quickly.

"Though we are all the same, inwardly. And your Celestial houses hopefully expressed such through their actions and expectations." He stared down his colleagues before continuing. "I would like to introduce to everyone, Professor Alekos Chiron, headmaster of Aripedes Academy." Chiron stood slightly and bowed his head, as applause and loud cheers (from the Paraffins, mostly) met his ears. "And Deputy Headmistress, Alcina Thetis." The old woman around McGonagall's age inclined her head in greeting to kind applause. "With time, you all will come to know the rest of Aripedes' professors, as you all will be sharing classes from time to time." Thrilled, light chatter erupted around the hall at the wizened wizard's announcement.

"We're sharing classes?" Ron strained his voice excitedly.

"Must you always repeat his answers?" Hermione retorted, but Ron wasn't paying attention.

"Wicked!" Ginny pumped her fists at her sides. At Dumbledore's throat clearing, the chatter ceased.

"Furthermore, I would like to introduce to all, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Liam Kenward." Gentle ovation was heard throughout the hall as the plaid cloaked man waved briefly at the hall. Young girls were tittering annoyingly, and clapping hard for the young man. "Be safe, and good fortune be with you." Small laughs scattered around the Great Hall, and several girls were on the verge of swooning. Hopefully, this man wasn't another Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Oh, brother." Ron rolled his eyes at the girls. Luckily Hermione didn't find anything but his credentials interesting.

"He had better be a step up from Umbridge." She hissed the toad-faced woman's name with revulsion.

"That's for sure."

"Classes this year will begin on September third—" deafening cheers and applause cut off the headmaster, but he merely smiled in amusement. Harry was among those who clapped especially hard, along with Kaltag, Icarus and the ecstatic Ron. Hermione sat dejectedly, near tears since classes were postponed until the day after tomorrow.

"We've got a free day! Bloody brilliant!" Ron was barely audible over the dull roar of sound.

"You have us to thank for that!" Icarus reminded jokingly. The whoops ended seconds later, and the old headmaster was met with countless shining faces.

"And you will receive schedules tomorrow. Sleeping arrangements have been made; you will notice as you explore the castle, that many places have been enlarged to house everyone. Common rooms and dormitories have been expanded to accommodate everyone comfortably. Your respective years will sleep in the same rooms, share the same lavatories, and perhaps, the same classes. You are all families, now. As such, your triumphs will still earn you house points, and your misbehaving, will sadly lessen your points." He turned to the empty hourglasses behind him, identical to the

ones in the entrance hall. Harry blinked rapidly at the glasses; instead of just rubies in the Gryffindor hourglass, there were now rubies and light blue gems, also. The Slytherins had green and violet gems, the Ravenclaws, navy and diamonds, and the Hufflepuffs, amber gems and orange ones.

"As families, you will learn together, and embrace all the qualities of a true family. Trust, respect, cooperation, loyalty...everything a real family entails. Good luck to you all, our young wizards, Beings, witches, and Entities. Proudly go on through your year. Dismissed." Clamoring was all that was heard as hundreds upon hundreds of students stood, emptying out the Great Hall.

"Ron, we've got to help the first years," Hermione reminded him. The prefect rolled his eyes.

"As we've got to get our first years," Icarus told Kaltag. "We don't even know where your chambers are." Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Ron, you take care of Kaltag and Icarus. I'll handle the first years with Colin and Victoria." She ordered, pushing her way through the crowds to Colin. Ron smiled at his new friends.

"First year Paraffins!" Kaltag called out.

"Paraffins, year one!" Icarus bellowed. "Gather 'round, ankle biters!" Nikola lightly punched the man, who squeezed his arm and hissed. The blonde Paraffin rolled her eyes.

"I barely tapped you!" Icarus' eyes widened.

"Nikola, a light tap to you is the equivalent of a full-blown jab." Starbuck clarified sarcastically.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked him.

"FIRST YEAR PARAFFINS!" Kaltag yelled. "Where the bloody hell are you all?" he added in an undertone.

"Nikola, is the future Entity of Intellect." Starbuck explained. "What is it that Chiron always say, 'know you strengths, inners and external...?'"

"She's also going to supervise all of Olympus' armies, one day." Icarus rubbed his arm gingerly. "Her powers are super strength and speed. FIRST YEAR PARAFFINS, IF WE HAVE TO CALL FOR YOU AGAIN—"

"Ah, here they are." Kaltag pointed to a small cluster of mousy-looking children, all wearing the same black robes as the older years. They were easily distinguished as first years because of their short heights and nervous expressions. "Gather 'round, and stay together." Kaltag ordered them. "Ron, of you would please?" The Gryffindor prefect nodded, eyeing the rapidly emptying hall. They were the last group still at the tables. The professors stood to watch the students leave, and Harry saw Malfoy and the other prefects push roughly past a few Hufflepuffs and Brittlebores.

"Boy, they learn quickly," Nikola commented sarcastically. "Slytherins and Aves to the last." Ron looked at the girl.

"So are Aves as bad as the Slytherins?" he queried. They seemed similar, but were they really like Malfoy and the others?

"Depends," she began. "Are Gryffindor and Slytherin the best of friends?" Ron and Harry pulled disgusted faces and shook their heads vigorously.

"The worst of enemies."

"Huh," Starbuck scoffed. "No wonder we're complements of each other. Paraffins and Aves are the bitterest of enemies."

"Dark Celestials usually come out of Aves." Nikola voiced. As the last of the Hufflepuffs and Brittlebores filed out, Ron clapped his hands together.

"Well, let's on to Gryffindor tower, eh?" he stated. "Follow closely, because this'll be your first unofficial tour of the castle. Where you'll learn trick steps, portraits to avoid, and many other interesting facts along the way."

"Enlighten us." Icarus stated, taking charge of leading the small students, alongside Ron at the front. Harry fell in step beside Kaltag,

at the rear of the group, monitoring the children. Nikola and Starbuck joined the leading prefects, the four amiably chatting along the way.

"We've much to discuss," Kaltag told a silent Harry. We've got as many questions as you have." Harry chuckled.

"I'm sure the dormitory wouldn't mind a late night discussion. After all, there are no classes tomorrow." The Boy-Who-Lived reminded. "What do you say we tour the castle tomorrow?" Kaltag nodded.

"All right."

"Oy, how about we sing a song to pass the time?" Icarus called to the others behind him. The nervous first years said nothing. "Oh, I'm an ickle firstie, yes, I'm an ickle firstie, watching out for the older years to toss me in the trash bin..." The others laughed goodheartedly, making a few of the younger children quake.

"Knock it off, Icarus," Kaltag admonished. "You're scaring them." Icarus furrowed his brows, his face set in thought.

"Ninety-nine Paraffin firsts on the wall, ninety-nine Paraffin firsts," he sang awkwardly. "Use your force, they're a sore loss, ninety-two Paraffin firsts on the wall..." Harry was certainly aware they were still in the great hall, in the presence of their professors surveying the exiting group. Icarus was singing quite brashly, and his voice echoed along the walls of the dining area. He glanced back nervously, and sighed when he noticed most had amused smirks on their faces.

"Madame Syrna would rip out her hair if she heard you right now," Nikola told the boy. Harry vaguely wondered who 'Madame Syrna' was, before Kaltag answered his questions.

"She was our first and second year Voice instructor. Choir." He uttered with distaste. "It's a required class for all first and second years. You drop it as soon as you can." Harry sniggered silently, imagining the first years dying of boredom in the class.

"She's not bad at all, Kaltagonus. You just never liked her." Nikola accused.

"And with good reason." Kaltag furrowed his brows in aversion.

"Eighty-one Paraffin firsts on the wall, eighty-one Paraffin firsts. Pop your wand, six in the beyond, seventy-five Paraffin firsts on the wall..." the Black Sliatyckx orber continued.

"Icarus Ilias Inigo, leave them be." Kaltag warned lightly. Harry sighed. Icarus sure was a joker. Like Sirius and his father when they were younger....

"One more." He begged. They were near the end of the hall, due to their slow pace. "I told the Rem teacher, 'I want a first year stew.' And the Rem teacher, he told me what to do. And he said, 'you see, lcky-C, chop them up, and stir 'em in your cauldron. You see, lcky-C, chop 'em up and stir 'em in your cauldron—with your wand!" A loud snicker was heard behind them, but was quickly stifled. It had to be one of the professors, since they were the last people in the hall.

"Do you enjoy thoroughly panicking the first years?" Harry heard Ron ask.

"Yep!" Nikola glanced back at the jittery first years and frowned.

"Mind you, your own little brother is in this group. And look, you've got Arum all frightened." She gestured to a brown-haired boy with freckles. "Your parents and Yorick won't be pleased."

"Yorick?" Starbuck countered in disbelief. "Forget about him! Amara and Kiden won't be happy. I'm sure Kiden'll take that orb of hers and knock it at your head a few times."

"I'd like to see her try." Icarus challenged smartly.

"Do you want me to tell her that?" Nikola drawled sarcastically. Icarus simply threw her a frightened, yet defiant look and said nothing.

"Guess that means 'no.'" Ron chortled, leading the group to Gryffindor tower.

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"...so your father's actually Hercules?" Ron asked Thanos Theion in disbelief. He was the muscular boy with brown eyes and dark brown hair talking to Dean and Seamus earlier.

"He's usually called 'Herakles,' but yeah, he's my father." The deep-voiced male answered. Harry gazed around the sixth year boys' dormitory. It looked the same, except it was much more larger than normal, to fit a total of twelve beds. Five Gryffindors, and seven Paraffins. All the males warmed up to each other quickly, as they introduced themselves and shared countless jokes and embarrassing stories. He had never felt so comfortable with strangers.

A word that could hardly describe the dozen now. Even Neville was more outgoing compared to his usual, quiet, edgy self. There was no distinction between wizard and Celestial. They were all boys.

Brothers.

Not too close, but close enough.

There was Yorick Kaenslar, the curly-light-ginger-haired boy with freckles Harry and Ron had recognized from Flourish and Blotts. He was a member of the incredibly large family purchasing their books. Scanning the room quickly, Harry tried hard to imagine the young boy and his siblings in their dormitory.

All eleven of them.

Apparently, the Weasleys weren't competition anymore. Yorick had ten siblings, boys and girls, and he was the third oldest. He stood to become the Being of Harvest, which explained his rustic features and laid-back composure. He came off as a sarcastic, yet sensitive slacker, but he was not one to fool with; Icarus had stated the Being was a seriously great Orber for the Sliatyckx team, which earned him the nickname, 'Yorick the Terrible.'

Thanos Theion was the only son of Herakles and Megara. He explained how he was a Sliat for the Paraffin Sliatyckx team, and quite a topic for the young Entities. His future title would include Being of the Wizarding World, making sure nothing got out of hand among the wand wielders.



Erec Hamon, another Black boy, was the reserve Orber of Yorick; for the most part, he was quiet, and very timid, yet intellectual. One thing was for sure: Erec was proud to have his younger brother, Alistair, join him at school as a first year. Basil Montgomery, a thin, black-haired boy was born of Muggle parents. It was uncommon among the usually pureblooded Celestials to have Muggle parents, but it indicated somewhere along Basil's lineage, a Celestial-Muggle marriage or affair occurred. He, like Erec, was the reserve Fenzer for Starbuck.

Yes.

They would definitely be close this year.

"...wonder if the girls are doing the same thing at this very moment." Starbuck spoke, staring at the ceiling.

"Well, they aren't playing Sliatyckx, that's for sure." Icarus murmured from his bed between Ron and Neville's. The Gryffindor prefect tossed a pillow at the boy, effectively nabbing him in the face.

"Must you always be so sarcastic?" Kaltag asked, from his bed beside Harry's.

"Yes." Icarus grinned toothily, lobbing a pillow at the other Paraffin prefect. Kaltag skillfully blocked it, sending it flopping to the floor.

"This from the third highest student in our year," Yorick muttered.

"Is there anything else we should know about your world?" Seamus asked, scratching his head. "It's getting a bit late."

"We've no classes tomorrow." Dean reminded the Irish wizard "And it's near two in the morning. Surely you can't be tired." Dean and Seamus began to carp and nitpick back and forth between each other.

"What are your professors like?" Yorick questioned, sitting on the edge of his bed. Harry picked at a Chocolate Frog he snuck from the feast and chewed an arm before answering.

"McGonagall's very strict. Professor Sprout is nice, and very fair." He began. "Flitwick has quite a sense of humor if you get on his good side..."

"Lest we forget Snape." Ron murmured disparagingly, scowling at his other wizard mates. "Lucky you two didn't get into potions." He frowned at Neville and Seamus.

"I got an E," Neville proudly told them, before his face fell. "But Snape isn't accepting anyone that isn't 'O' material."

"Slimy git." Seamus mumbled. There were a few moments of silence only to be broken by Icarus.

"I take it you five don't like this, 'Snape'?" The five boys immediately broke into angry ravings.

"He hates all students—"

"Only likes his Slytherins—"

"He's got greasy black hair—"

"Scowls, sneers, and seethes at all Gryffindors—"

"Deducts points if you answer his questions correctly—"

"And he barks and yells at you—"

"Malfoy's his favorite, of course—"

"—and this ugly crooked nose—"

"He hates Harry, of course—"

"He likes to humiliate me—"

"Totally evil, I tell you!"

"—yellowish skin and—did I mention the greasy hair?" At once the descriptions died down. Their descriptions were met with silence. Harry noted Kaltag appeared a bit thoughtful during their rant, as if he was considering their bias answers.

"Real piece of work, then?" Erec asked.

"Something like that, yeah." Harry responded. Basil and Erec yawned, deciding to turn in for the night. Waving their wands to draw their hangings, no sound was heard from their beds after they slept.

"History is completely boring. The professor's a ghost." Ron described. "Yet, you get the best naps in his class. The books are so soft, especially if you bewitch it with a Cushioning Charm."

"At least you get to sleep in history." Thanos spoke, a hint of anger and irritation in his voice. "Our teacher's a downright git. Hates us all, the Paraffins."

"Hmph," Harry hummed. "Sounds like a Celestial Snape." The mere thought of Snape as a Celestial made the Boy-Who-Lived quiver. It definitely wasn't one of his more pleasant thoughts.

"He is. Forces us to stay awake all the time, gives out random quizzes, does unfair things, favors his house, Aves." Yorick complained, then smirked widely. "Luckily we have someone on our side. And I'll bet he'd even dish out free points to Gryffindor." Ron quickly sat up.

"Who?"

"Our Remedies—"

"Your potions—"

"Shut up, Icarus." Starbuck snapped. "Our Remedies instructor. Solid Paraffin, gives out points if you put your right foot before your left. He's that easy." Neville lowered his eyebrows.

"He can't be that easy." He challenged.

"Aye, but he is." Yorick answered. "Remedies is a hard subject, but he gives us points for our efforts, and he always takes time to teach us how to create potions. He's the perfect teacher." Harry furrowed his brows and stared at his hands. Not even Snape taught them exactly how to make a potion. The man just assumed they read the

first year guide and spells instructions on the board. It's a wonder so many probably didn't make it into the N.E.W.T. level class.

"Celestial Remedies are more advanced than Potions," Kaltag stated. "By our second year we were brewing such concoctions as Veritaserum and Draught of the Living Death."

"You're pulling our leg, right?" Dean questioned uncertainly. "I mean, second year..." Thanos shook his head.

"Nay, Dean." Yorick answered. "We've been brewing level four potions since we hit puberty."

"Yikes." Neville expressed with an uneasy face. Kaltag toyed with his silver chain.

"The price you pay for being a Celestial student." Kaltag vocalized.

"Bloody Merlin, enough about our school." Icarus ended, gripping the footboard and grinned mischievously at Harry and Ron. "Tell us about the witches of Hogwarts...."

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A/N: Revised chapter.

A/N 2: And as a side note, I wanted to let you know Celestials start school when they are twelve, go on for six or seven years, and continue until they are eighteen or nineteen. The seventh year is mainly for extra testing to have a better chance at a solid career and utilizing their inner forces. At the end of the three years are tests, unlike Hogwarts, who only have O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.

## Chapter Eight Clues

- 1). The new friends spend the free day amongst themselves.
- 2). We learn exactly how well Aripedes complements Hogwarts.
- 3). We begin classes.

## Chapter Eight: Strangers & Star Charts

Much noise could be heard about the Sixth Year boys' dormitory, as the twelve males woke up separately and headed for breakfast. Harry had to pinch himself numerous times to make sure he wasn't deceived by a surrealistic dream. But one look at the expanded dormitory and the seven extra beds confirmed his reality.

It wasn't a dream. He had met real Celestial students. Friends.

With a wide grin, Harry slipped off his bed and yanked his trunk before him, rummaging around to pull out toiletries. Tired of making out the blurry forms loitering about the room, Harry pushed his glasses on, shut his trunk and shoved it back under his bed. As he walked to the lavatory, he realized many of the boys were either in the bathroom, or missing. Erec Hamon and Basil Montgomery's beds were empty, as was Neville's, and Dean and Seamus were splitting their time between the bathroom and their beds.

A tired-looking Yorick Kaenslar could be seen roughly shaking the slumbering form of Thanos Theion, and a beaming Starbuck Smythe stood nearby, a clear, hovering glass of water looming precariously over the sleeping Being's head. At the sight of the sweat beading on the floating glass's exterior, Harry could tell it was somewhat cold—

Wait a moment.

Hovering?

Floating?

Starbuck held no wand in either of his hands, and no one else around him seemed to have their wands in sight. The boy was barely concentrating on the bobbing chalice, which was now lowered a foot near Thanos' head. Yorick stifled a snicker, but was dismayed when Thanos grunted and woke up. Harry continued to stand near the foot of his bed, his mouth gaping at the display. Could Celestials do wandless magic? Shaking himself out of his state, Harry cautiously approached Starbuck. The blonde-haired boy immediately spotted the Gryffindor and smiled.

"Morning, Harry. Sleep well?" he asked. Without need for the water anymore, the floating glass soared over into the hands of Starbuck, who didn't even use a summoning spell.

"How...how did—?" Harry stuttered, aiming his toothbrush at the Being, the glass, the place where said glass once hovered, and retraced his pointing. The Celestial seemed to have understood his stammering and swirled the water in the glass.

"I guess we didn't get to my force last night," he simply began. Starbuck tipped the glass of water to his lips and sipped a liberal amount. Smacking his lips together audibly, he set the glass on Thanos' night table before answering his newfound friend. "I am the future Being of Dreams and Fancies, Harry. So, my force for the most part is telepathy, and to a degree, telekinesis." He demonstrated by looking at the glass and holding his hand out again. As if it were under its own accord, the goblet rose from the wooden side table and found the boy's hand again. Harry merely stared. "I can read others' thoughts, but only if they allow me. And I can also summon things—anything, really—to me." Harry felt slightly uncomfortable with the fact the boy could read his thoughts, and he continued with his questions, now more understandable since he wasn't stuttering.

"You can read the thoughts of others?" It came out in more of a statement than a question. Starbuck plainly nodded.

"For now. When I become the Being of Dreams and Fancies though, I will only be able to interpret the dreams of others. Reading minds is only a preparation mechanism until I become an Olympic Celestial." he explained. Harry just nodded. Sensing Harry's continued discomfort, Starbuck proceeded. "But I've been taught many methods by my father to shield my mind from infiltrating others'. Only if someone is truly thinking something dangerous, I can penetrate their mind."

"Ah." Harry answered. He felt much better knowing the boy couldn't read his mind now, unless he was thinking of something hazardous. Harry smiled for good measure and glanced around. Ron's bed was empty, as were Kaltag and Icarus'. "Where did they go?" He inclined his head toward Ron's empty four-poster. Starbuck drank a bit more water.

"Prefect lavatory," he declared. "Icarus was dying to see Hogwarts'." Harry ended his conversation with Starbuck as he entered the bathroom after a stumbling Thanos. Apparently, the boy had yet to fully wake up, as he nearly ran into Dean and Seamus.

"Yorick, you comin'?" Seamus asked his fellow Irishman. Yorick grinned and joined the others heading out of the dorm. Harry quickly performed his daily routine of brushing his teeth and showering, afterwards throwing on a gray raglan shirt, dark jeans, and trainers. He realized he was the only one left in the dormitory as Starbuck and Thanos had left while he was in the shower. A bit peeved at having to walk by himself, Harry thrust his wand in his pocket, and headed for the door. As he was about to head out, Kaltag and Ron spilled into the deserted dormitory and greeted the Boy-Who-Lived with hearty good mornings.

"Where's Icarus?" Harry asked as he only noticed the pair. The other prefect had gone with them to the prefects' bathroom, but had not returned. As Kaltag threw some soiled garments into the nearby hamper, Ron answered.

"He met up with Yorick, Seamus and Dean." He responded, adjusting his socks. "You seen Hermione and Ginny?" Harry shook his head and leaned against one of the posts of his bed, crossing his arms.

"No," he replied. "Haven't been down, yet." Ron absently nodded as he retied his laces. Kaltag tucked his wand into one of his back pockets, and Harry lowered his brows. "You shouldn't tuck your wand in your back pocket, you know. Could lose a buttock...." He vaguely reminisced Mad-Eye's spoken warning to him over a year earlier, in which Tonks responded—

"Who d'you know has ever lost a buttock?" Ron asked in bewilderment. Harry blinked, eyeing Ron strangely, before answering.

"No one, but Mad-Eye...." He trailed. Kaltag had moved some books around in his trunk before slamming it closed and latching it tightly. He toyed with his silver chain around his neck a bit, before deciding he had nothing else of importance to do. Clapping his hands together, he smiled at his new pals.

"Let's off to breakfast, shall we?" The three made their way carefully through the busy common room, packed with Celestials and wizards avidly conversing. A couple of second years dominated the couch, students from both worlds chuckling and tittering amongst themselves. The three boys looked for their opposite-sexed friends, and in Kaltag and Ron's case, siblings.

"Think the girls have gone on to breakfast?" Ron asked, glaring at a few raucous fourth years. Harry merely nodded, either looking for a mane of red or bushy-brown hair. Just thinking about Ginny's hair color made Harry wonder about the girl he had seen earlier on the train, reading by her lonesome in a cart.

"Likely," Kaltag answered. "No doubt Nikola's dragged them off." The male trio pushed open the portrait and walked into the active hallway, smiling at a few passing Ravenclaws. Rounding the corridor, Harry noticed more Celestial and wizarding groups clustered together and happily chatting. A day off truly was the best decision in light of the discovery of the new world. Harry couldn't help but blush as many witches passed them, giggling nervously and throwing them seductive smiles. He was a bit stunned to notice even a few second and first year witches attempting similar expressions. And with good cause: the trio of boys weren't the ugliest males on campus thus far. Harry and Ron had grown over the summer, physically and mentally. Though they tended to keep their boyish personalities, the boys were finally coming into their own as men.

"Is it me," Ron began, some of his juvenile thickness teeming in his voice. "Or are many of the witches and Entities staring at us?" Harry merely sighed and rolled his eyes, while Kaltag pursed his lips to keep from laughing.

"I notice nothing out of the ordinary." Harry lied. Leave it to Ron to mature bodily and keep the qualities and thought process of a pre-pubescent boy. Ron shrugged and glanced away from the others.

"We're getting our schedules today, right?" Kaltag asked the others.

"We should." Ron answered, then beamed. "I can't wait to drop Divination. That old fraud will be out of our hair for good."

Neither can live, while the other survives....



Harry furrowed his brows and frowned deeply. Ron's comment on Trelawney set his thoughts wandering to the prophecy. He was very

happy not to have her class anymore. The Gryffindor could not picture himself sitting in her class and looking at her through his usual, disbelieving eyes. Not when she predicted his future, be it killer or victim.

They had reached the expansive Great Hall without fault, though the dining area was jam-packed with students. A roar of sound met their ears from corridors away, so the boys had expected the place to be full.

More students rushed into the hall for breakfast, all pushing their way to their respective tables. Ron angrily jostled a horde of rude seventh year Ravenclaws, all chatting merrily with some seventh year Voltaires. As the boys made their way through the crowd, Harry could make out the slightly less bushy hair of Hermione at the Gryffindor/Paraffin meal table. There were a few empty seats around her, Harry noted, but Nikola was seated beside Hermione, with Ginny on her other side.

The space before the girls was completely vacant, so Ron led the other two to the blank seats. Dean, Yorick and Seamus were nearby, as were Thanos and Starbuck, with a few girls. Parvati and Lavender were chatting with a Paraffin Entity with long, sepia hair, and sun-kissed skin. She had bright green eyes, and her voice was soft, lilting and loving. Harry caught himself gaping at the beautiful girl, and was slightly stunned that Ron was doing the same. The dark-haired girl made him feel fluttery and mawkish... He felt like he would do anything for her. A low chuckle made him break out of his reverie. Kaltag folded his arms and nodded his head to the girl both lovesick boys were gawking at.

"I see you've spotted Circe." He spoke amusedly. Ron's lips pulled into a dreamy smile.

"Circe...hmm," he replied distantly. "Mrs. Circe Weasley...." Harry felt a slight pang of jealousy at his friend's blatant claiming of the heavenly female. The girl continued to talk to Lavender and Parvati without once glancing to the boys. With careful speculation, Harry's eyes widened when he noticed the line of boys—wizard and Being—standing behind the girl, all with sappy expressions on their faces.

Roger Davies had a foolish smile plastered across his face, whereas Zacharias Smith leaned on Theodore Nott's shoulder, a not quite intoxicated smile etched in his haughty features. An Asian Being with short, spiky black hair stood directly behind her, just happy to be in such close proximity to the Entity. Harry reluctantly broke his gaze to seek out Malfoy. The blonde had his eyes transfixed on the girl. Harry mused the Slytherin prefect would have been by Circe's side if an incensed Pansy Parkinson didn't have her arms locked around Malfoy's. Crabbe and Goyle sat by the boy, failing to notice where his attention was. As she lifted her hand to flip her long, murky-brown, straight hair, every male staring at the Entity nearly swooned. She took no notice.

"Is she..."

"An angel?" Ron interjected with a silly intonation.

"No..." Harry fought for coherent control over his thoughts, as his head swam. It was hard staring at such a beautiful creature and trying to speak logically at the same time. "Is she a Veela?" The girl's startling green eyes were bright and carefree as she gossiped with Lavender and Parvati. The Being of the Elements chortled again.

"Much worse." He responded, tugging on the hesitant Harry and Ron's elbows to sit down. "Circe Balthazar, the future Entity of Love. Daughter of Aphrodite and Eros. This is a bit less than the usual number of boys flocking to her." Once he pulled the limp Harry and struggling Ron beside him, Kaltag settled and pulled food onto his plate. Hermione noticed the boys had arrived and smiled warmly. Her grin fell into a slight frown as her best male friends' attentions were turned to one of her new dorm mates.

"I see they've met Circe," she lightly buttered her biscuit and raised her brow. Kaltag nodded, and started munching on eggs and bacon carelessly. "How long do you think they'll be this way?" The Paraffin prefect merely shrugged and continued with his meal.

"Has she got a bloke?" Ron asked fancifully, propping his elbow on the table and placing it absently in the saucer of butter. Ginny hid her titter behind a strip of bacon while Hermione scoffed.

"Plenty," she lied. "And they're all legal." Harry eyed Hermione with distrust before returning his gaze on Circe and distractedly dipping his strips of bacon into his goblet of milk. Kaltag snickered and threw Hermione an amused look.

"No," he truthfully answered. "And she won't until she becomes the Entity of Love." Ron furrowed his brows and doused his breakfast roll in tea.

"Well, why not?" he infuriatingly questioned. Starbuck, switched seats with Seamus so he could sit beside Ron.

"Because her father, a six-four, two-hundred-pound death dealer, won't let anyone male—but close friends—near her." He teased, removing the roll from Ron's grip before he chewed it. "It didn't faze him when the last four went missing...." Harry and Ron quickly sobered up, ignoring the beautiful girl for now.

Breakfast was uneventful following their embarrassing episode, and the boys lining up behind the gorgeous Entity finally dwindled when Hermione and another female Gryffindor seventh year prefect threatened to take house points for disruptions. As Nikola sipped her morning tea, she eyed Hermione over the rim of her steaming cup.

"Hermione?" she asked sweetly. "Can you please direct me to the library after breakfast?" Hermione dropped her fork with a loud clatter. Staring at the girl with eager and excited eyes, the Gryffindor witch beamed.

"Of course!" she accepted. Kaltag's head shot up and he looked at the girl.

"May I come along, Hermione?" he inquired. With a hearty nod, the girl smiled widely. Kaltag returned to his breakfast mumbling something under Ron's groaning.

"....Classes haven't even started yet, and already they're off to the library..." the redhead mumbled. Harry merely glanced at his best friend and shook his head with a grin. As he turned to his cooling breakfast, Harry noticed the heads of houses—for both schools—were handing out pieces of parchment to each student at breakfast. McGonagall, he noticed, was nearby, with Celestial Professor Thetis

right on her tail, handing what seemed like the schedules to her Celestial students.

Hermione excitedly accepted her schedule, her hands trembling with excitement, barely listening to the words McGonagall was whispering in her ear. Thetis handed Nikola her schedule with a thin-lipped smile, surpassed Harry and handed Kaltag his timetable. Harry noticed she gracefully smiled at the young Being, reminding him of McGonagall's extremely rare smiles.

"Good luck this year, Mr. Smythe." She expressed with a stern voice. Kaltag gave her a lopsided grin before his brows wrinkled and he examined his agenda.

"I'll need it, thanks." She moved on and Harry found McGonagall directly next to him.

"Your timetable, Mr. Potter." She stated, pushing it into his hands. Harry glanced upward to thank her, and was taken aback. On his Transfiguration teacher's face was one of her sporadic, valued smiles. "Congratulations." With a brilliant smirk of his own, Harry cocked his head to the side.

"Thank you, ma'am." When McGonagall moved on to an anxious Ron, Harry knew she praised him for passing the required O.W.L.s in order to become an Auror. It seemed as if nothing could bring him down from this elated feeling of completing another step to achieving his dream career.

"Aw, bloody—!" Ron exclaimed before lowering his voice and quickly looking to see if McGonagall heard him. A couple of nearby second years shied away from the peeved prefect. Harry gathered his eyebrows and leaned around Kaltag to see what had upset Ron.

"Ron, what—?"

"I've still got Divination!" he spoke through gritted teeth, his face reddening with every word. Harry was taken aback.

"But we've—none of us passed the O.W.L.—" Harry glanced at his timetable, scanning the classes, hoping against hope—no chance. Harry grunted angrily and flung his timetable at the meal table. Ron smiled grimly.

"I see you've got it, too." Harry threw Ron an annoyed look. Some morning this was turning out to be. Kaltag gave them sympathetic grins.

"Not to worry." He lightheartedly assured, scanning his schedule once more. His eyes lightened a bit. "I've got it, too." He pointed to the spot on his crammed schedule which was clearly labeled, 'Studies in Divination.' Ron nodded reluctantly.

"At least you'll suffer with us." He wrinkled his face and stared at Kaltag. "What made you take it in the first place? I didn't even know they offered it at Aripedes." Kaltag folded his schedule in tucked it into his jeans pocket, shaking his head shadily, as if he knew something.

"I don't take Divination at Aripedes." He replied, grabbing a biscuit. "At least, not directly." Harry shifted a bit, warily eyeing the Being.

"What do you mean?" he asked the obvious question. Kaltag chewed his food quickly and swallowed.

"Aripedes offers subcategories of Divination." He began, taking a swill from his goblet. "Few students take direct Divination. For instance, instead of straightly taking the class, I take different methods in it. Such as Oneiromancy, Rhabdomancy, Chaomancy, and the like." Harry had briefly brushed over different types of Divination with Trelawney, but none of those Kaltag named jogged his memory. The professor mainly kept with crystal balls, Palmistry, and reading tea leaves. Not exactly subjects that render to keep one conscious.

"Are these more interesting than Divination, or just as trite?" Harry questioned. Kaltag nodded.

"You seldom get true results from them, but it is fun." He responded with a genuine smile. "In Oneiromancy, we get to study the dreams of others, but our professor usually has us make them up." Ron gave Harry an intrigued look, and he leaned in more to hear what the Being had to say about Aripedes classes. "In Rhabdomancy, it's usually theory, since none of us had wands to practice with. But Chaomancy, on sunny days, we lie out on the lawn and study the clouds, or anything that drifts in the air. Funny how we can predict

death and destruction through fluffy, gliding bunny rabbits." He smiled mischievously. "In Icarus', case, of course." Ron and Harry shared avid grins, until Ron frowned.

"Wish I had your Divination classes." He grumbled. "Your professors sure sound like fun." Kaltag simply pulled his agenda out of his pocket and opened the folded parchment.

"Ah, but you will." He gestured to the Divination portion again. "'Studies in Divination,' taught by 'Various Instructors.' Did Dumbledore not say we'd be sharing classes?" Ron appeared stunned before beamed.

"So we'll be having your professors." He stated. Kaltag nodded as Ron and Harry pumped their fists and celebrated in their respective seats. Hermione and Nikola quickly stood, and the boys' gaze followed them.

"Off so soon?" Kaltag joked, ducking to miss his powerful sister's swipe.

"Are you headed to the library now?" Harry asked the girls. Hermione shook her head negative.

"Back to the tower. To get our books." She and Nikola briskly walked down the aisle, between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, dodging roughly shoving students.

"We'd better go, then." Ron also stood, stretching, before nabbing another biscuit. Harry and Kaltag agreed, along with Starbuck, and the four boys headed back to the dormitory before Roger Davies again approached Circe Balthazar, sliding in one of the vacant seats beside her and staring in deep fancy.

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The quartet of Gryffindor/Paraffin boys walked to the library quickly to catch up with Hermione and Nikola. They shrugged their weighty bags over their shoulders and talked in earnest about their classes. Ron hastily brushed over how excellent Divination would be, now that they had the 'Celestial version.' Madam Pince stared hard at the four before they silently walked toward one of the study tables far from her view, which was not too far from the Restricted Section.

Something struck Harry about the library, as it had appeared different. There weren't many students present, save for a few Ravenclaw/Voltaires and Hufflepuffs and Brittlebores. The Slytherins and Aves were few in number. From the many times he had come here in the last five years, it hadn't changed. Now, there was something off about the place.

Starbuck and Kaltagonus took in the entire library, both boys with Hermione-like looks on their faces, eager to bury themselves in the books. Ron spotted Hermione and Nikola seated at one of the tables and made his way there. The others followed, staring around the library for various reasons. Placing their rucksacks down, the witch and the Entity stalled their conversation to pull out their schoolbooks. Starbuck dropped his bag in a stiff-backed chair beside his sister, and squinted his eyes at the shelves upon shelves of tomes.

"Icarus was telling me about this really good Oneiromancy book," Starbuck mused. "I need to find it." Hermione stood from her chair and closed her book.

"I'll help you find it." She offered, looking around the library strangely. They were followed by the other four, albeit reluctantly on Ron's part. Hermione eyed the place as though seeing it for the first time, and started down the section on Divination. She sniffed unpleasantly at the texts, and wrapped her arms around herself protectively. Her eyes caught sight of some books on the shelf near Starbuck. The Gryffindor witch pulled out a book and read the title to herself.

"These are new books." She declared. "And the library is much bigger than normal." Ron raised an eyebrow.

"I would've thought you, of all people, would be the first to notice that, Hermione." Ron accused amusedly. Hermione threw Ron a sharp look before replacing the book and pulling out another one.

"Interpreting the Dream Realm," she read. "These are Celestial texts. She looked to one of the three Smythes for an explanation. Starbuck's fingers traced the spines of each book on the second shelf, his eyes never leaving the books' bindings.

"They've probably added a bit of our library to yours so we can also get some work done." He pulled a thick book from the shelf and turned to the others. "We've got P.E.G.A.S.U.S. testing this year."

Ron didn't like the sound of 'testing,' but it didn't stop him from inquiring.

"What's P.E.G.A.S.U.S.?" he queried, leading the group back to their table. The sextet sat down quietly, pulling out books before Starbuck answered.

"They're an advanced form of your Ordinary Wizarding Levels, though not quite the equivalent of your Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests." At the mention of N.E.W.T.s, Ron's face scrunched and he paled a bit. Nikola yanked out a bright blue notebook with the same Aripedes crest Harry had studied yesterday.

"We take them after our F.O.R.C.E. test," she continued, searching her bag for a writing utensil. "Which we took at the end of last year, our fifth year." Starbuck visibly shuddered and wrinkled his face in aversion.

"Reminder not needed, Nik," he grumbled. "Those were nastily exhausting." Hermione was enthusiastic to hear how the tests worked, so she put her quill down and folded her hands before her.

"Were they that bad? How are they different from wizarding tests?" she questioned. "I mean, O.W.L.s were tiring last year, but worth it." Kaltag, who was pulling out workbooks and parchment, now stopped what he was doing.

"They were boring and demanding, really." He stated, racking his brain to reminisce. "F.O.R.C.E.s are all theory. No practical examinations. Those aren't until the last two tests." Ron became pallid at the mention of an all theory exam.

"So you mean, you did nothing but essays and questions?" Harry inquired, bewildered. He would've never survived the O.W.L.s if there wasn't a practical. Kaltag dourly nodded.

"Fifth years take F.O.R.C.E.s, sixth years take P.E.G.A.S.U.S., and in seventh year, you take O.L.Y.M.P.U.S." he stated tiredly. "They're looking to burn you out before hand." Hermione folded her arms, her eyes alight with keen curiosity.

"What do they stand for?" she asked. Starbuck yawned, flipping through his Oneiromancy book.



"Future Olympian Rudimentary Celestial Examinations—F.O.R.C.E.s," he began. "Uh, Practical Examination Governing Assessment Sessions Utilizing Skills, P.E.G.A.S.U.S.—our forces and powers, and the like. And...what's it...? Yes, the Outstanding Learners' Yearly Master Pupil Utilization Session, O.L.Y.M.P.U.S." Hermione took it all in, nodding with every test.

"They test us on our ten subjects, usually. Except for Kaltag, of course." Nikola glowered. "He's taking twelve of the thirteen total subjects in our curriculum. Right old overachiever, he is." Ron and Harry both raised their eyebrows at the Being, who merely shrugged.

"What are you, a male Hermione?" Ron voiced aloud. Hermione hushed him with an icy glare, and looked over her shoulder to see if Madam Pince had come around the corner. Facing Nikola, Hermione flipped through a Transfiguration book set in front of her and mulled over another question.

"Scoring system?" she queried. Starbuck was now reading his Oneiromancy book, and jotting down notes. Kaltag had pulled out another thin, silver workbook, and a thicker tome.

"Totals for F.O.R.C.E.s are thirty, P.E.G.s are sixty-five, and O.L.Y.M.P.s are one-hundred and thirty." Starbuck answered. Ron and Harry started to pull out their own textbooks and parchment, seeing that everyone had begun to work on something. Ron sluggishly jerked out his Potions book, and Harry, his Charms requirement.

"How are they scored?" Harry asked. Something gave him the feeling this would be a complicated answer. And he was right. Nikola and Starbuck winced at the question, while Kaltag looked sickly.

"F.O.R.C.E.s are from zero to two, with half-steps. P.E.G.s are zero to five, and O.L.Y.M.P.U.S. is zero to ten. Complex, truly." He answered. Nikola rolled her eyes.

"Kaltag has the highest scores on his F.O.R.C.E.s." she sneered. "The only person to get a score higher than him, was our headmaster." Hermione, Ron, and Harry were impressed with the coloring Being, who buried his face in his notebook.

"So, what did you get?" Ron asked him. Kaltag appeared as if he did not want to answer the question, but did so hesitantly.

"Twenty-six out of thirty," he replied. "Professor Chiron got twenty-seven."

"Nikola and I both received a nineteen." Starbuck put in. "So we're still ranked up there with him." He playfully sneered at his brother. Kaltag quirked his eyebrows mockingly.

"Yes, but not quite." He kidded. Harry enjoyed watching the playful banter between the siblings, somewhat wishing he had a brother or sister he could joke with. Alas, as his parents were killed before they could probably even think of raising a second child....

"Well, I received thirteen O.W.L.s," Hermione began, "And Ron and Harry made six and seven, respectively." Ron shook his head from his tedious potions reading and eyed Hermione in confusion.

"Hang on," he started, placing his book down. "Thirteen? How did you get thirteen? I thought you had eleven." Hermione beamed undauntedly, hopping slightly in her seat.

"Professor McGonagall told me at breakfast when she handed me my schedule," she started, swaying in giddiness. "The examiners had to recheck my results. There was a huge debate over some of my scores. Anyway, I gained two more O.W.L.s!" Nikola congratulated her, while Ron stared at the clever witch in disbelief.

"That's even with Dumbledore. Why didn't they re-score mine?" he asked Harry. The Boy-Who-Lived was a bit speechless. He bit his tongue to keep from telling Ron that if they had to recheck his results, he probably would've gotten a lower score. It was a comment to be made all in good fun, but knowing Ron's pride and temper, he didn't want to risk it.

"Hermione's scorekeeper probably fell asleep while reading her long essays...." He joked in a low tone. This comment was a better choice, as it put a laughing smile on Ron's face.

"Yeah, you're probably right, mate." They returned to a comfortable silence as Madam Pince began to stalk between the tables, eyeing the scarce number of students warily. Harry read about

Disillusionment Charms and the Novice Protean Charm, the theories and spells behind each. He could easily see why the Protean Charm was seventh year material, with its complex theory and concentration. He would've welcomed any distraction to keep from reading this and gaining a headache.

"Oh, great." Muttered Ron. Harry noted he was looking back at the library's entrance and held a contemptuous look on his face.

"Lovely." Kaltag murmured likewise derisively. When the others eyed those walking through the door, Harry narrowed his eyes and glared.

"Malfoy." Hermione bit out. He could understand how and why Ron, Hermione and himself would be upset at Malfoy's arrival. But why would Nikola, Kaltag and Starbuck not be as welcome with the pureblood Slytherin? Perhaps the Malfoys were not as revered in the Celestial world...? Behind Malfoy was a pug-faced, leering Pansy Parkinson, with Crabbe and Goyle lumbering not so far behind. With the Slytherin prefects were also the Aves prefects, the raven-haired male and pretty blonde female, along with their russet-haired, pointed-faced male friend. Malfoy and company seemed to have spotted Harry and friends, because the signature smirk on his face was one of the mocking versions. He was looking to bait someone.

"Can he not see we're busy?" Starbuck ground out.

"He'd still come," Nikola replied, a hint of irritation in her voice. "Always does." The depraved smirks on the seven Slytherin and Aves' faces were clearer as they came to a halt before the Gryffindor/Paraffin table. Icy glares were emitted from the six seated students, daring to be upset.

"Well, well, well," Pansy simpered. "Potty and the groupies." Crabbe and Goyle grunted with laughter.

"Hmm," Kaltag broke in before Harry or Ron could retort with, 'Pugsy and the Death Eaters'. "Xenik and the poodles." Harry could immediately place who Xenik was, as his black hair brought out his reddened face.

"Smythe." He stated through gritted teeth.

"Xenik." Kaltag responded, equally so.

"What brings you to the library?" Nikola questioned suspiciously. "I see no books or schoolbags." Draco raised a pale, perfect brow.

"We need school supplies to have an agenda in the library, now?" he sneered.

"No," Ron took over. "We're merely stating as such since Crabbe and Goyle can't read. And I'm not too sure Pansy can, either." Pansy's dog-like face burned in anger, while Crabbe and Goyle flexed their gorilla-like arms and cracked their knuckles menacingly.

"It's not gentleman-like to insult a lady." The beautiful blonde at Xenik's side admonished. She had a nasty sneer on her face that only solidified her wickedness.

"I'll remember that next time I see a lady." Kaltag retorted smoothly. The others—and surprisingly, Hermione and Nikola—laughed amusedly at the Being's comments, which only served to anger the Slytherins further.

"You Paradors think you're funny, do you?" The brown-haired boy snapped. His eyes blue seemed unfocused as he scolded the others. Hermione narrowed her eyes into brown slits.

"Paradors?" she repeated. The blonde Aves prefect sniffed.

"Paraffins and Gryffindors," she answered sneeringly. "Paradors really are stupid."

"We're much smarter than Averins," Starbuck snapped. "Also ninety times smarter than you, Faryn." The Entity, Faryn, curled her lip in disdain.

"Watch yourself, Smythe," Xenik warned Starbuck. Kaltag narrowed his eyes.

"What do you want? As you can see, we're quite busy." Hermione pointed out. Malfoy and company simultaneously smirked.

"We're here to warn you all." The russet-haired boy spoke up. Starbuck raised an eyebrow.

"Aye?"

"Watch yourselves especially," Malfoy leered. "We're the best coterie Hogwarts has ever seen. The best of both worlds." Kaltag, Harry, and Ron let out derisive snorts.

"Best of both worlds?" Ron snickered. "I'm shaking, really, I am." He tried to keep a serious expression but failed.

"Malfoy, you're hardly a challenge." Harry admitted. It was true. In every duel or scuffle with the light-haired Slytherin, Harry always came out on top. Especially in Quidditch. And if he didn't, Harry's back was most likely turned, and he was unaware.

"And Xenik, the day you become a 'force to be reckoned with,' is the day—" Kaltag abruptly stopped, tapping his chin with his finger. Coming to a silent agreement, he smiled insultingly and shrugged. "Well, that will never happen, so I've nothing to worry about." Xenik's face locked in anger and his eyes began to oddly glow glossy, metallic silver. It's as if the shiniest, most polished Sickles took the place of his eyes, and they glittered in the sunlight. No more were there icy hazel eyes, but dangerous platinum ones.

"Why you—" He spat through gritted teeth. It happened in mere a flash. Seconds later, something long, sharp, and silver sprouted from his hand and was aiming for Kaltag's neck. Hermione gave a sharp cry and leapt from her seat, and Ron looked as if he were the one about to be harmed. The Slytherins behind Xenik smirked victoriously, as if their point was made; the Aves were stifling laughter. Starbuck and Nikola just glared at the Being and offending weapon. And Kaltag...Harry eyed the boy carefully, searching his blue eyes for an answer.

Only his eyes weren't the brilliant blue topaz anymore.

In place of the Paraffin's startling eyes, were shimmering orange ones, shining just like Xenik's. It was as if someone lit a match and set his irises on fire. Such anger and flames were burning in the boy's glowering eyes. Really.

Kaltag glared at Xenik, and flung his hand out to grip the glinting sharp-edged sword protruding from Xenik's palm. The way his hand seized the weapon, the boy would have been fatally wounded. Should have been fatally wounded. Harry squinted as a faint carrot glow emitted from Kaltag's right palm on the saber, and the polished steel began to glow, red-hot and orange, traveling quickly to the Aves prefect's hand. Xenik was hard-pressed to stop the rapidly traveling fire, and gave an injured shout, yanking his hand back. The boy's eyes returned to their peeved hazel color, while Faryn assessed his hand. The sword was gone, having disappeared, and no one spoke as the Aves girl caressed the boy's hand. Kaltag's eyes remained their fiery orange hue, burning brighter, almost golden.

"Try that again, Xenik," he began icily. "And I'll hit you with a lightning bolt instead. And don't think all of you will escape me if you try anything." Malfoy and Pansy blanched and looked nervous, while Crabbe and Goyle for the first time appeared helpless. The Aves boy behind everyone's eyes widened, and became staid. Faryn tried her best to glare, but couldn't as she was frightened. Xenik scowled, letting his burned hand fall to his side. Harry spotted an angry reddish-black mark on his palm, where the sword had been. There was no blood, from whence the sword came out, or from Kaltag's burn.

It was then Madam Pince decided to finally make an appearance, despite the loud commotion the thirteen had caused in the last five minutes. She frowned at all of them, her eyes peeling back and forth between both groups.

"What is going on here?" she hissed. No one, not even Hermione, wanted to speak up. Harry realized then, if they had said anything, they would have hit a snag. How could you tell an adult you were attacked with a massive sword, when the sword in question did not exist? Not to mention, telling the woman the sword came from the offender's palm? Might as well book a bed in Lockhart's ward in St. Mungo's. No one would believe that.

Eyeing Kaltag, he noticed the boy's eyes reverted back to their normal, crystal blue color. The librarian fixed her fists on her hips and glared at the Averins and Paradors. "Well?" she forced impatiently. Hermione quickly took her seat, and kept her eyes locked on the aberrant Celestials and wizards.

"We were studying," Starbuck stated truthfully. "And they decided to threaten us, and disrupt our reading." Pince did not look very convinced or pleased, but she did notice the standing group lacked books and study materials.

"Those of you with books and school resources may remain only if you are quiet." She shook a finger at the sitting group, and then turned to Malfoy, Xenik, and the gang. "Now, you seven, out. You are disturbing the peace of my library. Be glad you haven't started classes yet, or major house points would be deducted from both houses." She shooed the Averins away, who were glaring at the Paradors over their shoulders. There was a tense silence at the table, as no one knew what to say. Kaltag was scowling at his book, and Nikola and Starbuck were angry. Hermione eyed Nikola and Kaltag with concern, while Ron questioned Harry with his eyes.

"What...just happened?" Ron asked uncertainly.

"You've just met Androcles Xenik, Being of Metalwork, and his lackeys. His new ones, too." Nikola answered.

"Erik Hansen, Being of Strife," Starbuck continued, "and Faryn Dufresne, Entity of Influence. I'm guessing you knew the others." Harry nodded grimly.

"Draco Malfoy, pureblood advocator, and Pansy Parkinson with his body guards, Crabbe and Goyle." He replied. "Don't ask which one is which, I don't even know." Hermione came out of her worried reverie to glower.

"He attacked you! That's breaking at least a dozen school rules!" she condemned. "And he could've gotten expelled for that! He's a prefect!"

"Xenik isn't one to bother with the rules; he's unbalanced—you saw him erect that rapier from his palm. He can make anything out of metal, steel, anything from his hands, or anywhere on his body. Weapons, sculptures, you name it. Disregards rules, and picks fights. He isn't even a prefect." Kaltag responded, tugging on his silver chain. "Plus, I used my forces, too. How do you think I burned him, an invisible torch?" Harry raised his eyebrow at Kaltag. Though it seemed frightening at first, Kaltag's force of fire control was

impressive. Not even a standard wizard could do that much damage with his or her wand.

"Not a prefect?" Hermione hadn't heard the rest of what the boy was saying. "Then how come—"

"He and Faryn were made 'honorary prefects,' or 'prefect deputies,' by the real sixth year Aves prefects." Starbuck told in disgust. "They don't have real power, but in case something happens to one of the true prefects, they take over. Stupid." Harry only imagined a method like so in Hogwarts; then Crabbe and Goyle would have been honorary prefects. Hermione's expression signaled she hated the idea, but had no say in the matter.

"Have you chosen a prefect deputy?" she asked Kaltag. He shook his head.

"No, not yet." He replied. "Not like I have a choice, really. It's the next one down the line in my year and my house rankings. Which would be Starbuck." The Being in question smiled proudly.

"He has yet to formally make me his deputy." He expressed. "Probably because he wanted to make his girlfriend his deputy." Kaltag sent a wintry glare in his brother's direction.

"She—is—not—my—girlfriend," he pushed through clenched teeth. "I have no significant other." Starbuck playfully rolled his eyes and nodded.

"Yeah," he admitted. "Right." Hermione divided her glances between the two boys before resting on Nikola's amused face.

"Who—?" she began. Nikola quirked an eyebrow, and nodded slowly. Hermione's expression lightened. Kaltag watched the exchange between the two girls. "Oh. Oh...." Hermione grinned mischievously and met Kaltag's annoyed expression, his face turning red. "Her?" she playfully spoke. Harry and Ron were left in the dark, as Ron was searching everyone's eyes as if sifting through their thoughts for an answer. Either they all were expert Occlumens, or Ron was a horrible Legilimency master. Or neither.

"Who 'her?'" he queried. "Who? Who is she? Who?"



"Yes, Pigwidgeon," Hermione joked. "Nice owl interpretation." Ron shot her a look but kept at it. Kaltag only flushed a brighter vermilion at their teasing. No doubt he wanted to keep it a secret. Harry sympathized with him, as he desperately kept Cho a secret for a year and a half from his friends. To have your siblings and a complete stranger know who your fancy was, was...well, disconcerting. Kaltag's eyes sought Harry's emerald ones, and he produced an uncomfortable grin.

"So, Harry...brother," he addressed. "Want to replace Starbuck and Nikola as my sibling?" Harry only laughed, which made Ron redirect his line of questioning.

"What about me? What did I do?" he asked. Kaltag slowly turned to him.

"You're inquiring, aren't you?" he told the redhead. "So you can't be a new Smythe."

"Endy Magnus." Starbuck said. Kaltag's head whipped in his direction, and he glared at the Being of Dreams and Fancies, undoubtedly wishing harm on the boy. Harry thought he saw a remnant flicker of orange pass through the boy's azure eyes.

"What?"

"Endymion Magnus." Nikola explained. "The girl who Kaltag fancies."

"Shut...up." He warned through his gnashed teeth. Nikola smiled impishly, as did Hermione.

"Out of Isis and surprisingly, Circe, you fall for Endymion?" she toyed. Her gaze and face fell. "Are there anymore Paraffin Entities in your year?" Kaltag was ecstatic for a change of topic.

"I don't think so," he declared. "Circe Balthazar, Isis Layland, Endymion Magnus, Nikola Smythe...no." Hermione furrowed her eyebrows and tapped the junction of her mouth with a shiftless finger.

"Odd." She voiced. "There was another bed in the dormitory. The hangings were drawn, and I couldn't see the initials on the trunk. Funny, I didn't see her at dinner. And she has to be a Gryffindor."

"Maybe a transfer?" Harry offered, thinking it over. He hadn't noticed anyone new at the table. "But then, wouldn't she have been sorted?" Ron shoved his textbook back in his bag.

"She probably got sorted in private, but when would that be?" Hermione suggested. "We were all extremely busy yesterday." True; Dumbledore and all the other professors were going on about setting the place up for the Celestials. How would they have time to sort a new, older student in the midst of all of that?

"Probably came during the summer to get sorted." Ron recommended, casually turning pages in his book. "What class do we have first tomorrow? Ah, forget it." He shoved his hands in his pockets to pull out his timetable, but no listened as they were yanking their own schedules out also. Harry unfolded his parchment, and really looked at his classes for the first time. There were the usual classes, yet they were paired with unrecognizable classes and teachers.

"Charms-slash-Early Wizarding Education?" he recited. "With Flitwick and Thetis? Do you all have that first?"

"Yeah." Was the simultaneous reply.

"Look, Divination is after charms with Ravenclaw." Ron frowned.

"History with Binns and Einar," Starbuck seethed. "Horrible."

"We've got Potions and Remedies with the Slytherins and Aves first thing tomorrow." Hermione put in excitedly. "And Herbology and Celestial Floras, Transfiguration, and Defense in the afternoon."

"We'll finally get to see if we have a male Umbridge." Ron mused. "Wonder what'll happen to him. What d'you think, Harry?" The Gryffindor Seeker glanced at the Weasley from studying his schedule.

"What?"

"Think he'll die, Obliviate himself, resign, be an undercover Death Eater, or get mauled by Centaurs?" Ron offered.

"Worse." Harry replied.

"How so?" Harry gave a wry smile and a weird chuckle.

"He could be normal."

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The free day came to a frenetic end as everyone rushed to get their robes and bags ready for classes for the next day. Breakfast was more settled than the day before, but the noise level was reminiscent of the welcoming feast. If one took an aerial view of the large great hall, there would be a mixture of color and black.

The Celestials' robes were colorful, rather than the drab Hogwarts black, and the fabric was a shiny satin. Unlike Hogwarts, their robes were similar to capes. The Aves wore violet cloaks with a platinum lining, with their violet and silver ties, white shirts, gray sweaters (trimmed with purple and gray), and black pants or skirts. The Voltaires were in basic white and black, their cloaks white, with black interiors. The Brittlebores were a shock of color, with their violent orange cloaks with a yellow lining. Ron was especially enthusiastic for the color, since it reminded him of his favorite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons. Finally, the Paraffins had the most revered cloaks, bright periwinkle, with a navy blue interior.

The ties were unlike Hogwarts, with alternating checkerboard patterns in their house colors. It wasn't their only tie; the other version was a tie with thin vertical stripes in house colors, sporadic in size and color, bordering on contemporary. The Aves wore the vertical-striped version, while all others stuck with checkered.

Crests on each cloak were dissimilar, much like the host school's. The Aves Falcon, adorned in a deep plum, glared menacingly at anyone from another house. The Voltaire Lemur, black and white with protuberant eyes and a searching expression, curled over the left breast of the Voltaire students. The Leopard of Brittlebore, decorated in orange, yellow and the occasional black, bared its jagged, sharp teeth, conveying the house's fierceness in loyalty. Phoenix was the mascot of Paraffin, an odd periwinkle and navy, to

which Starbuck explained the founder of the house, Philemon Paraffin, had a peculiar-hued phoenix named Edsel, the only odd colored phoenix in the world.

A flutter of wings could be heard, more of a clamor, as hundreds—many more than usual—of owls poured in through the Great Hall windows, dropping packages off for their respective students. A large barn owl lobbed a package at Neville, who no doubt forgot something at home. Pig twittered madly around Ron's head with a small notice for Ron, and Hedwig brought Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny a small package of sweets from Mrs. Weasley. It was unusual, since Mrs. Weasley only sent letters to them, never sweets unless it was a holiday. The snowy owl hooted affectionately at Harry, picking up a scrap of bacon and flying away. More owls zipped around the table, dropping letters and notices from parents and guardians. Even the Celestials had owls, which they probably bought in Diagon Alley.

A red owl dropped a small parchment in Starbuck's lap, and he stroked the owl affectionately.

"Mercury," he spoke to the nearly hopping owl. The red hawk owl was like a normal-sized bird, with Pig's personality. But he appeared a bit more mature than Ron's miniature messenger. "A letter? So soon?" A silvery-white Boreal owl sailed gracefully to land before Kaltag's plate, two small epistles attached to her leg. Harry lowered his brows and studied the beautiful owl, happy that Hedwig had flown off earlier. If not, she would have bitten him hard for admiring another owl. He had never seen an owl with glinting silver feathers before, so white and immaculate.

"Argentum," Kaltag greeted with a loving pat. "Dad sent something already?" He read the names on the scrolls and passed one to Nikola, sitting across from him. Both read their notes.

"From Erastus," Nikola read. "'Have a good school year.' How sweet." The others learned in the library the day prior, that Erastus was their butler, but more of a family friend than his occupation stated. "He's probably lonely in the mansion without us." Owls were still spilling into the hall, and the students sat unconcerned and continually chatting. Harry swirled his cereal around, watching the dregs of milk and flakes swimming at the bottom of the bowl. Yorick trotted quickly into the hall, with five minutes to spare before the morning notice was issued.

"Where were you?" Starbuck queried suspiciously. The Being of Harvest was eagerly stuffing his mouth with everything he could find, with some milk spilling out of the corner of his mouth. As he opened his mouth to answer, a scream pierced the silence from the Hufflebore table. Many shocked cries followed and Harry pulled out his wand, scanning the hallway, just in case. Watching his pupils, he noticed their eyes were on the window with the dwindling number of owls rushing in and out. A few odd laughs were heard around the hall as Harry made out a shape in the midst of the owls.

A man.

A familiar-looking Black man with a small, silver chariot built for one, without any beast guiding him, raced over each table, dropping packages to the colorfully-cloaked students below. He had a wide smile on his face, and a silver garland with small wings around his head. His hands were working fast as he flung parcels and parchments to the students, and his small chariot guided itself over the dining areas. A few laughs were heard from the Parador table, and Icarus was avidly watching the man deliver letter after letter to Beings and Entities. After a few minutes of handing deliveries to professors, the Black man flew over the Paraffin and Gryffindor table, dropping things in their laps. He flew between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw aisle and stopped beside Kaltag, Ron and Icarus.

"Kaltag," he greeted merrily. "I've nothing for you or Starbuck, or the fair Nikola," he tipped his garland to the blushing Entity. "But your mother and father express their hello and good wishes." Nikola quirked her head.

"Father is on Olympus?" she asked. The man shook his head.

"I came from headquarters a few hours ago," he answered. "I do hope you all are behaving yourselves." He eyed the Beings and Entities around him sternly. "I have constant contact with your parents, you know." The Smythes blushed a bit before facing their breakfast.

"It's only the first day of classes, dad," Icarus told the man. "How can we get in trouble?" The man turned his gaze on Icarus, and playfully glared before ruffling his hair.

"How are you faring, Icarus?" he asked. "Made any friends yet?" Harry observed the exchange between father and son, with Kaltag adding such quips as, "Of course, he's your son—and that's saying something." Harry pocketed his wand and returned to his breakfast. A few Ravenclaws were eyeing the man anxiously, whereas Luna was gazing at him with interest. Some Voltaires were trying to explain to their new friends that the man delivered their post, as owls were unusual pets at Aripedes.

"Dad, I'd like you to meet Dean, Seamus, Neville, Ron, and Harry," Icarus pointed out his Gryffindor roommates, who all gave small waves. Harry was startled out of his stupor until his name was called. He dropped the spoon he was trying to balance on his nose and smiled sheepishly. "My roommates and friends." The messenger waved at Dean, Seamus and Neville, who were at the far end on the opposite side with Basil and Erec. He extended his hand to Ron and Harry, who both clasped their hands in the man's firm grip.

"Boys," he began. "I'm Hermes. Messenger of the Celestials. Icarus and Hiram's father." He introduced, glancing around. "Where is your brother? Have you been watching out for him?" Icarus nervously laughed.

"Er...yeah, yes. I have." He half-fibbed. Hermes raised an eyebrow and pat his son roughly on the back with a chuckle.

"We'll see." He vocalized. "Nice meeting you Ron and Harry. Keep Icarus out of trouble, will you three?" he motioned to Kaltag, Ron and Harry. The boys nodded, and Hermes went on his way to meet his other son.

"If only he knew how much trouble we get into," Kaltag murmured.

"I'll toast to that." Harry agreed.

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"I have foreseen our reunion in my daily crystal-gazing," Professor Trelawney's misty voice lulled. "And I knew we would join forces with the world of Celestials." Harry and Ron rolled their eyes knowingly.

"Oh, she did, did she?" Ron mumbled. The room was as stifling and heavily perfumed as ever, with the throws covering the lamps,

illuminating the room in deep red shades. Kaltag and Thanos chuckled lightly, and Kaltag rested his chin on the back of his wrist to toy with his platinum chain.

"I have also seen that many of you will not be seeing much of me," Parvati and Lavender sighed in sadness. "As I will be sharing this class with numerous others." She cleared her throat disparagingly as her gaze flickered to the group of Aripedes professors sitting uncomfortably in chairs toward her office, eyeing the many over-the-top decorations in Trelawney's classroom skeptically. "One's Inner Eye gets clouded in the heat of congestion." She furtively glanced at the instructors.

"No, it dies in the wafting heat." Kaltag muttered, fanning himself with his summer work. Harry nodded discreetly, watching the bulging, bug-like eyes of Professor Trelawney's glasses eye each student. Her eyes drifted over to the pupils, settling her gaze on them for a moment, then continuing. Harry looked away when her gaze next landed on him, the prophecy fresh on his mind. The divining woman resumed her scrutiny, before her large eyes settled on a student in the very back for a long while, before she sighed.

"As you can see, these fine Celestials," she limply gestured to the group, "will also be instructing you, along with Professor Firenze. We will tell you where you will next meet after every class." She turned to her colleagues grudgingly. Harry vaguely wondered if they exchanged words with the woman about her over exaggeration of her 'gift,' what with the constant metaphors and declarations that she possesses 'the Sight.' Trelawney was clearly unhappy with the professors, most likely assuming they were treading on her territory. "Please, introduce yourselves." The five instructors stood, radiating knowledge and power in the stifling room. The women went first, one by one.

"I am Cynthia Makis," a thin Pakistani woman in slate robes introduced. She had brown eyes and long black hair in a braid, and looked to be in her early forties. Her bright smile was warm and inviting, catching the students' attention. "I teach Botanomancy at Aripedes." The next woman stepped in, a plump, bronze-skinned Indian, with lively brown eyes, and dark brown hair. Harry asserted she was in her late forties.

"Cleopatra Eusebio," she tittered happily at her own name. "Rhabdomancy instructor. Look forward to teaching you all." A few students giggled along with her, and Ron glanced Harry amusedly. Next, a thin, exotic-looking (not quite English or Scottish, but Greek or Hungarian) blue-eyed, raven-haired woman took her place, her jade robes billowing with movement. She neared her sixties, but not quite, and her blue eyes foretold of years of knowledge. Harry, though not one for divination of any kind, wanted to have at least a taste of her knowledge, and suddenly had a yearning to learn from her already. Her posture alerted him to her many years familiarity with divination, and she stood proudly, yet had a slightly worn look about her, as if she had Seen more visions and made more prophecies than any of the Divination professors in the room.

"I am Professor Theola Sibley," she stated confidently, prominently. "I am skilled in ten forms of divination," Harry swore he heard Trelawney scoff at the woman. "Including Austromancy, Capnomancy, Ceraunoscopy, Geloscopy, Graphology, Hydromancy, Lampadomancy, Metagnomy, Oculomancy," Harry believed this is where Occlumency was derived from. "And Onomancy. I believe those born with the sight are rare in number, therefore I encourage my students to be creative through the difficult stages of Divination. It will be an honor working with my students, old and new." Trelawney tried her best to hide a scowl, failing to succeed. The women stepped aside to let the male professors present themselves.

A porky, Greek man with forest green eyes and wispy, fading brown hair darted with gray, lumped forward, adjusting his robes and smiling excitedly.

"H-Hello," he began nervously. "My name is Benedict Gregorus, and I teach Oneiromancy." He joined Sibley off to the side to let the last professor familiarize himself. A tall, medium-complexioned Black man with dark gray eyes and barely there black hair moved to attention, an avid beam on his face. His regal navy robes matched his odd, indigo wizard hat, and he looked younger than his age proclaimed he was.

"Professor Philosophe Cassand," his deep voice boomed. "We'll have loads of fun in Chaomancy. If you aren't, just let me know, so I'll do something to make it more bearable." The class chuckled and the professors took their seats. Trelawney's bulgy eyes accusingly followed the five while the students politely applauded.



"Well, Professor...Gregorus," she extended the man's name into a hiss. "I believe you have your students' homework to collect." The plump man shot up and called for homework nervously, as the Beings and Entities around the room shuffled in noise to pull out their work. Yorick, who was sitting with Dean, Seamus and Neville, kept throwing Thanos odd looks while glancing over his chart. Both boys had done their homework together last night, as it was only a dream and astrological interpretation chart. The Irish Being also checked his watch and tapped it many times, to make sure it was working. After the work was collected, Trelawney ordered them to read chapters one and two until the end of class, while she glared and scowled at each of her colleagues until the bell signaled the end of class.

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Thirty minutes before supper, Harry found himself back in the library with Ron, Hermione, Kaltag and Icarus. Starbuck was in the common room with Erec and Basil, while Nikola studied with Isis and Circe in the dormitory. Hermione complained at none of them having seen the mystery Gryffindor sixth year in their dorms at any of the meals or in any of their classes. She scolded Ron and Harry for not paying attention in any of their classes for any new students, and ranted for ten full minutes.

Madam Pince swooped down on some fourth year Ravenaires (Ravenclaws and Voltaires, Harry learned earlier), looming closer to their table. Hermione corrected a few last minute mistakes on their Potions summer work, while starting on her Arithmancy equations. Kaltag, who was trying to add more to his Remedies composition, kept distractedly glancing up at the library doors and frowning. Harry noticed he had been doing so for the last hour, and had barely added a paragraph onto his Remedies essay, which was due the next morning. Pushing aside his Potions paper, Harry reached for his Transfiguration book, having been tossed to the other side of the table by an absent-minded Ron.

"Looking for someone?" he asked the fretting Being. The Paraffin looked to the Boy-Who-Lived and bared a tiny smile. Hermione and Ron paused from their quill scratching and jokingly leered at the boy.

"Looking for Endymion?" Hermione questioned. Kaltag threw her an irked look. "She's studying with—"

"I am looking," he interrupted with much annoyance, "for Yorick. He was supposed to study with us. But I haven't seen him all day. Not to mention he's been acting quite odd." Harry opened his tome to chapter three on Trans-Subjective Transfigurations. He had been acting weird all day, glancing at his watch and staring in Thanos' direction. Icarus nodded in agreement.

"He's been after Thanos today, I think they have this thing going," he proffered. "This plan or something." It was then a smiling Yorick Kaenslar ambled into the library and to their table. Madam Pince scowled at the boy and skipped their table, eyeing the six cautiously.

"And where've you been, eh?" Kaltag asked, staring at the giddy boy. Yorick ran a hand through his highlighted brown curls, setting his bag down.

"Well, Thanos predicted something in our cross-referencing Oneiromancy/Astrology homework." He began, tugging books and parchment out of his sling bag. Kaltag tapped his red-tailed hawk-feather on a scrap sheet of parchment.

"What did he predict?" Ron asked, bending his quill absently. The Sliatyckx Orber sighed heavily.

"That I'd be meeting a soggy, dark stranger in the lavatory." He stated, shuffling some papers. "Tried to stay there for as long as I could all day."

"Interesting." Harry spoke up, watching the working boy. "Well, did you meet them?" Yorick yawned and scratched his head.

"I came up with a conclusion."

"What?" asked Icarus.

"That Oneiromancy is incredibly unreliable and as imprecise as true Divination?" Hermione quipped knowledgeably. Yorick shook his head at her notion.

"No," he replied, opening his Remedies book. "I had a great breakfast and a huge lunch, so needless to say, the dark stranger was somewhat relieved for me to finally get it." Hermione's eyes widened and she bowed her head into her book, but Harry could see the color creeping over her face. Kaltag resumed his homework with a pallid expression, and even Ron buried himself in his books, suddenly finding interest in Potions.

"I think I'll skip dinner." A wan-looking Kaltag grumbled, though his rumbling stomach protested.

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A/N: Revised chapter. Read and review.

## Chapter Nine: Melting Cauldrons & Livid Masters

Students spilled out of the Great Hall Wednesday morning after breakfast, ambling tiredly down the aged corridors of the esteemed wizarding school. Hogwarts was very much alive with the chattering students, all zipping through the maze of school. Not only were the students lively, but also ghosts, the portraits and various decorative antiques took pleasure in the cheerful morning. To their amusement, the ghosts weaved through walls and floors, passing through students and unwillingly allowing them to experience the frigid temperature of their transparent bodies.

Suits of armor robotically snickered when they scuffed the carpet or put out their hard, protective legs to trip those unsuspecting, worn-looking, bleary-eyed pupils moseying down the hall. A few portraits were being downright cruel to the lost first years, directing them to the opposite end of the castle, nowhere near their classes. Peeves even kicked his game up a notch, bouncing off the stonewalls and dousing his victims with pumpkin juice and flour. A number of unfortunate students tried hexing the poltergeist, but he merely blew raspberry, cackled flippantly, and took off down the corridor to terrorize another student. Yes, emotions were indeed running high.

Especially for the Gryffindor sixth years.

It was the first time—ever—they were excited for a particular class, save Defense Against the Dark Arts their third year. What was surprising to most of the other Hogwarts houses, was the class.

Potions.

Due to the Paraffins' positive ravings about their Remedies professor, the Gryffindors were ecstatic about meeting the new man to co-teach with their surly potions instructor. The Slytherins were, at first, baffled by their sudden interest in the class, yet visited old habits of obloquy every waking chance.

And not only were the N.E.W.T. students excited about Potions, but today they would also finally meet their new defense teacher. Harry was impressed, not to mention extremely proud most of the sixth year members of the Defense Association passed their O.W.L. and made the N.E.W.T. class. A small euphoric churning swelled within him, prideful and somewhat relieved.

He had also brushed over thoughts of this year's Defense Association, mulling over how to invite the Celestials. Technically, the organization still wasn't teacher-approved, and he doubted the Celestial prefects would endorse and enlist. Except for the sixth year Paraffin prefects, Icarus and Kaltag. But he didn't know them extremely well enough to decide. Harry was currently closing his robe tighter over himself, shifting his bag higher on his shoulder. He, Ron, Hermione, the Smythes, and Icarus had just entered the corridors of the dungeons, where the iciness of the air foretold of their first class.

"Bit cold down here, isn't it?" Icarus expressed, gripping the front of his robes. They paused as the Fat Friar burst from the wall to pass through a Hufflepuff third year.

"It is a dungeon, Icarus." Nikola spoke as if it were the obvious. The Paradors traipsed toward the potions laboratory, anxiety and excitement tossing around their breakfasts. Ron kept switching his bag over each shoulder. Hermione couldn't help but giggle nervously. Kaltag periodically cleared his throat and sniffed.

"If your potions master is as horrible as you say he is—"

"And he is..." Harry interrupted.

"D'you think he'll discourage our Rem teacher?" Starbuck continued with his query. Hermione furrowed her brows and appeared thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, you did say your Remedies instructor is incredibly resilient when it comes to foulness. Perhaps Snape won't be able to break his spirit." She concluded. The others grimly agreed and continued the rest of the walk in silence. After what seemed like four seconds, the seven friends came upon their classroom and entered quietly. Harry noted the room was much larger than its previous years, due to the onslaught of Celestial students. Desks were seated with three stools instead of the usual two, to accommodate more bodies. If Aripedes had not come, there would have only been, at most, twenty wizards and witches from each house. The room contained over forty students, most likely much less than what Snape had wanted. None of the professors in question were present.

Of course, Malfoy and Parkinson were there, being the favorites of Snape; from Slytherin, there was also Blaise Zabini, Theodore Nott, and surprisingly, Millicent Bulstrode & Vincent Crabbe.

"Crabbe & Bull frog's here?" Ron hissed silently in Harry's ear. Hermione elbowed him lightly and glared in warning. "How'd they get in?" Harry could only shrug and shake his head. Ravenclaws were present with Terry Boot, Michael Corner, Mandy Brocklehurst, and Padma Patil. Hufflepuffs were strong in number with Hannah Abbott, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ernie Macmillan, of course, and—to Harry and Ron's vexation, Zacharias Smith. Dean was sitting between Terry and an Asian Voltaire student, and waved to the others when they entered.

There were also many Celestials in the room, including Xenik and Faryn; Circe and Isis sat near a girl with a Black girl with a Voltaire cloak, along with Basil, Thanos and a Paraffin girl with long ebony hair. Yorick sat with Erec, and Starbuck immediately ran over to sit with them. Many other Celestials from other houses were present, outnumbering the young wizards and witches. Two sullen-faced Aves boys with an unpleasant female companion sat across from Xenik and Faryn, who were chatting in low tones with Draco and Pansy.

"Where d'you want to sit?" Kaltag asked Harry. Hermione and Nikola took a seat by Hannah Abbott and began to pull out their materials.

"Back's fine." Ron stated, leading them to the table next to the girls'. It was the third one from the back, essentially five from the front. The sixth year boys quickly took their seats and mimicked the girls' earlier actions. When their Potions and Remedies texts were alongside their cauldrons, they surveyed the room once more. Harry scanned the room looking at the recognized faces around the area, some welcome, others, unwelcome, and one slightly less familiar. Studying the unfamiliar student one last time, Harry did a double take.

With her red hair hung in a slack ponytail was the girl from the train, sitting near a few Brittlebore girls and reading her Potions book. She was right next to the dungeon door, in case a quick escape was needed, and her face was set in bored concentration. A few wispy tendrils marred her appearance before she used her delicate hand to tuck them behind her ears. Harry attempted to search her with his

eyes and not appear too stalker-like, and stifled a gasp when he read her robes.

She was the mysterious Gryffindor girl the sixth years had been talking about.

He quickly turned to signal Hermione, but she was in deep conversation with Hannah and Nikola. Instead, he resorted to Kaltag, who was telling Ron about the difference between Potions and Remedies. Tugging slightly on the Paraffin's azure robes, Harry's emerald eyes met the questioning sky blue ones. Muttering out of the side of his mouth, Harry proceeded to inform him of the girl.

"You know the missing Gryffindor the girls have been searching for?" he murmured. Kaltag lowered his eyebrows and nodded slowly. Ron strained to hear Harry, but also nodded in understanding. "Red hair, back table, reading." The boys turned with years of grace in stealth, and took a peek at the elusive girl. After examining her for a moment, Ron leaned over and whispered to Nikola, no doubt telling her about the girl. The Gryffindor females also spotted the girl, and smiled warmly to each other. Seconds later the thick door banged open to admit a rushing Lavender Brown, her robe spackled with bits of flour. Peeves' doing, of course. She quickly set herself beside Mandy Brocklehurst and frantically fumbled for her textbook.

"She made N.E.W.T. Potions?" Ron mumbled. Hermione nodded grimly.

"Miracle, isn't, it?" she replied dryly. Nikola rolled her eyes and the boys went back to appraising the room. It was a few more minutes before the door again banged open. Only this time, Professor Snape strode into the room, his robes billowing and greasy hair flying. Chatter in the dungeon abruptly ceased, as several fearful gazes turned to the potions instructor. Snape advanced to the front of the room in all his bat-like glory, and whipped around to face the students. An annoyed scowl was set in his sallow face, framed by his long, oily tresses. Silence seemed to resonate throughout the entire room while Snape instinctually leaned on his podium to glower at his trembling students.

"Though it pains me to no end that I must teach the insufferable lot of you the aesthetic aspects known to most dimwitted students as potion making," Snape drawled in irritation, "for the next two years

you will gain knowledge of N.E.W.T. level potions." Snape began to eye the room. "I must admit, it is still an enigma to me how some of you managed to even pass the Ordinary Wizarding Level for potions," his dark eyes fell on Lavender, Ron (who winced), and naturally, Harry. The Gryffindor seeker stared defiantly into the instructor's eyes, who in turn, raised his eyebrow at the sixteen-year-old and turned away. "Since most of you lack the proper skills and knowledge to gain entrance into my elite class." Harry noted Kaltag stifled a snicker.

"Elite? Hardly." He murmured under his breath. Snape's eyes landed on his Slytherins, and they exchanged smirks, before he scowled again around the room.

"For those of you who have no clue as to who I am, I am Professor Snape." He introduced sourly.

"Welcome to my snarky nightmare." Mumbled Kaltag to both boys. Harry and Ron shut in their laughter, desperately trying to keep the smiles off of their faces. Snape clasped his hands over his podium and narrowed his eyes at the Celestial students.

"I have heard, by unfortunate circumstances, that the Celestials present in this class are the best of their year," a Pakistani Brittlebore gulped at Snape's words. "As to that, we will see." He turned to face the board and pulled out his wand. With a practiced wave, the blackboard came to life, sprouting instructions for the day's brew. "Today, we will be brewing—" For the third time that morning, the Potions door thumped open. A tall, thin, young male with a lively cotton navy cloak strode proudly in, a vast, cheerful grin on his face. His hair was short, brownish-blond and curly, and his thin, ivory face was vibrant and youthful. The startling hazel eyes on the man were alight with quiet amusement as he tucked his hands in his robe pockets and casually ambled down the aisle. Harry looked between the man and Snape and could see the potion master's face twist in disgust. His very eyes bore into the whimsical fellow, and steam could have easily billowed out of his ears. He hated this man. Almost as much as he hated Sirius, Remus, and, of course, Harry's father. Not forgetting his perpetual loathing of Harry.

"Started the class without me, Professor Sev?" The young man questioned, reaching the seething potions instructor.



"It is Professor Snape, Jace." He ground through gritted teeth. Jace merely shrugged.

"Most of your students don't even know me, yet." He pointed out. With that being said, the man turned to face the class with a bright smile. "Name's Professor Armistead Jace, Remedies and Potions Master extraordinaire." He bowed slightly before glancing around the class. Snape ran a hand through his mane angrily and nearly pulled out a full lock of hair. "I teach Remedies at Aripedes to my favorite students," The Celestial students applauded and cheered, with the exception of Aves; the Paraffins, Harry noticed, being the loudest. Kaltag all but jumped out of his seat to shout approval of the man. "And I would like to take the opportunity to get to know you all." Jace pulled out his wand, and tapped his lip in thought for a moment. His expression changed to one of satisfied delight and he muttered a spell. A deep plum, squashy armchair was conjured at the front of the class, and content, Jace plopped into the chair and beamed at the class. Snape, who was quietly twitching in the background, finally shook out of his stupor and glared at Jace.

"Professor Jace, we are in the midst of starting a new potion—"

"Already? We usually review the first day of Remedies at Aripedes," he revealed. "Start the grueling work next class, usually." Harry noted Snape trembled with rage, before he came up with a silent, calm inner agreement.

"Professor Jace," he hissed. "I do hope you are aware this is not Aripedes, and this is not your classroom—" But Jace wasn't listening to him. He had begun to scan the faces of the students and pointed to Hermione.

"You there, young lady," he smiled at the blushing Hermione. "Tell me something about yourself. Anything." Hermione swallowed and nervously looked around the room.

"Er," she began, mangling her hands around. "My name is Hermione Granger," she stated to Jace's encouraging nod. "And...I...am an avid book reader...?" she finished uncertainly. Jace nodded and lightly clapped. Snape's countenance scrunched in rage at being ignored.

"Very good, Hermione." He rewarded. "Now, you." He pointed to Terry Boot, who went on to say his name and his favorite Quidditch team. Snape stood in the back for the next few minutes, livid that Jace had brushed him off dozens of times at his attempts.

"...and I have a twin sister named Parvati." Padma Patil finished at the closing of ten minutes. The Remedies instructor nodded and scanned the room for the next student. He had done wizard and Celestial alike, going from Dean to Jason Quon, the Asian Voltaire, to Malfoy, and a smug-looking Aves named Erebus Isha. His eyes went over many faces before he fell the space between Harry and Kaltag.

"How about a another Celestial?" he stated. "You there, Smythe." Kaltag rolled his eyes playfully at Jace, as Snape had narrowed his eyes into angry, incensed slits.

"Kaltagonus Smythe," the boy replied. Harry watched as Xenik rolled his eyes and shook his head. Jace egged him on with a nod and smirked at the Paraffin. The ebony-haired girl leaned on her palm and stared at Kaltag with large, hazel, doe eyes. Snape, to Harry's amazement, widened his eyes a bit and stared at Kaltag, his angry visage now somewhat interested and furtive. His midnight eyes were unreadable as he stared at the Celestial boy. "I'm a Paraffin prefect." Jace groaned.

"Oh, come now, Kaltag, we need something better than that." He complained. Kaltag merely blushed and bowed his head. The beautiful, black-haired Paraffin girl grinned playfully and turned her attention to Jace. Snape blinked his dark eyes, his façade changing back to its normal, sneering self.

"I believe that is enough, Jace." He warned. Professor Jace raised his brow at his colleague and gestured to the class.

"We haven't gotten the full class, Professor—"

"The students have a potion to brew," Snape disrupted the man's rant before he had the chance to continue. Several low groans of protest could be heard from the students. "And they must—will start today. Without anymore interruptions." Jace appeared slightly peeved but he stood up and magicked the chair away. Ron groaned audibly and murmured something about not getting his turn, while

Snape smirked victoriously. He motioned to the board. "My students, you've done this potion in your fifth year. Aripedes Celestials have most likely done it in their second or third, hopefully under competent instruction." Jace threw Snape a cautionary glower. "Fill in the blank spots with the correct ingredients on parchment, and execute the potion. You have until the end of class. Those who make the potion flawlessly, will get a full day's marks. Those of you who don't...welcome to N.E.W.T. Potions. You're sure to fail the rest of the class. Get to work!"

The students quickly set out to finish the puzzle on the board, some working faster than others, like Hermione, Kaltag, and Icarus, who already whipped out their cauldrons and set to work. While others like Ron, Lavender, Crabbe, and Pansy, sat stumped for five minutes before taking out their materials. Snape and Jace kept a wide gap between them, as Snape propped himself on his scrubbed, tatty wooden podium, and Jace folded his arms and threw the other dark looks.

"What are they brewing?" he queried the slightly older man.

"You're a Remedies master." Snape jeered. "Why don't you tell me?" Jace glanced at the board for a few seconds and smiled.

"Burn Salve?"

"Asking or telling, Jace?" he sneered. The Remedies professor rolled his eyes, before swinging his head back to Snape.

"Did you warn them what happens when you add the crushed Runespoor scales before the Streeler venom?" he asked, a hint of hopeful worry in his tone. The potion master's lip curled upward in sick anticipation.

"Only the most worthy students learn the first time." Jace glared at his associate. He pulled a small, tan cube out of the folds of his robes, and placed it on a nearby table. He flicked his wand at it and the tiny cube grew larger, until it was the size of a briefcase. Snape's sneer faltered, and he glanced between the box and the younger professor. "What are you doing?" Jace opened the case, revealing dozens upon dozens of glittering jars of various colors and substances.

"Teaching a lesson." Jace replied, conjuring a pewter cauldron. Harry glanced to the front after adding his crushed shrike spines to his cauldron. The Gryffindor's eyes widened as he observed the Celestial teacher adding ingredients in quick succession, his hands moving like rapid fire. He didn't even have to glance at the board to see what he was adding. The grace with which he briskly included the hazardous elements was only that of a true Celestial. A true potions master. Kaltag was three-quarters of the way through his potion; he had the skills of both Snape and Jace, as he knew how to correctly brew a potion, even without the constituents list. He had halted before adding a substance, along with Ron and most of the class, to watch the Remedies lecturer.

"Your attention, please." Jace cleared his throat and announced. Many faces, angry and fascinated, abruptly halted their potion making. Lavender halted in pouring a light brown powder in her hand, clutching another vial with a yellowish substance. Hermione grudgingly sealed her beaker of murtlap tentacles, noisily banging it in irritation on her worktable. Snape bared his yellow teeth in fury and seized a fistful of Jace's robes.

"What are you doing?" he forced out through clenched teeth. Kaltag and Ron seemed caught between shock and annoyance, and Hermione made a disagreeing noise in her throat. Harry would've shattered one of his ingredient jars had Kaltag not caught it and placed it limply back in Harry's hands.

"What's going on?" he whispered to Harry. The Gryffindor merely shrugged in response. Jace, on the other hand, glanced at Snape's white fist, his outraged, pale face with saliva oozing out of the corners, and back before he rose an eyebrow.

"Demonstrating, thank you." He pried Snape's long, slender fingers from his navy robe, and proceeded to address the class, clasping his hands before him as if there was no animosity between him and the Hogwarts potions master. "As you can see, I am nearly finished with this Burn Salve. Some of you may be almost done, and believe the potion can't be any simpler. Now," he grabbed a phial of a thick, oozing yellow liquid and twirled it between his fingers. "As most of you expert young masters may have determined, with this potion, you do not have to follow any particular order of ingredients for this concoction." Snape glowered warningly at his younger partner.

"Jace—"

"But what you probably forgot," he continued in a louder tone. "Was one of the more dangerous substances in this lot." He held up the vial of liquid. "Streeler venom." The Aripedes professor nabbed a smaller, thinner-glassed phial with a taupe powder in it. "When it comes to this particular part, you do not want to add any powders or crushed serpent scales before venoms—in any potion, really. It only serves to ensue in commotion. Can anyone tell me what may happen?" A few hands shot up, including Kaltag's, and not surprisingly, Hermione's. Jace pointed to the Black Voltaire girl. "Melia?"

"The cauldron will explode?" she asked. Jace rocked side-to-side indicating a mediocre answer.

"Stavros?" A tanned Brittlebore snuck a pleading glance to his tablemates before answering.

"It will...form an...illegal potion?" he declared indecisively. Jace shook his head and pointed to the Aves girl in the front.

"Marieke?"

"You won't produce the desired potion." She sneered as if it were common knowledge. Harry had the urge to blurt out, "Well, duh," before he subdued it boorishly.

"Obviously." He hid a snigger. "Ah, Hermione?" The witch smiled brightly, as most of the teachers at Hogwarts—especially Snape—used or spat her surname when addressing her.

"The high acidic levels of a Streeler's venom mixed with magical serpent scales, which would have already fused with the previous set of hypersensitive ingredients, will inadvertently catalyze, and chew through the iron structure of the cauldron, thereby forcing the cauldron to melt." She stated more firmly than her predecessors. Lavender Brown gave a feeble wince and stared at the vial in her hand. Jace nodded.

"Precisely." Professor Jace uncorked the crushed Runespoor scale jar and poured the lot in. The cauldron gurgled slightly before emitting large tufts of orange smoke. Smiling winningly at the class,

and then to Snape (who shook his head and growled), Jace opened the bottle with the Streeler venom, eyeing the seductive smoke issuing from the opening. "Observe." Harry narrowed his eyes and watched as Professor Jace tipped the phial and decanted the liquid into the cauldron. There was a feeling of foreboding and tension in the room, and Hermione's eyes were glued to the cauldron. She had a knowing glint in her eye and bit her lip when Jace emptied the fluid into the pewter cauldron.

After a few seconds, nothing happened. The cauldron continued to puff out pale orange smoke. Some Slytherins and Aves in the front of the classroom sniggered and shook their head at Jace's antics. Malfoy and Xenik were exchanging jeering words at the hazel-eyed professor's expense, before it happened.

There was a quiet hissing emitting from the cauldron, before it completely collapsed, and ate through the pewter. Orange potion over ran the stump of cauldron, spilling vituperatively on the wooden worktable and eating a hole right through it. Lavender Brown gasped at the sight and looked at the phial of venom clutched in her palm. Harry surmised she was just about to add the venom after she poured in her scales, which would have had the same result as Jace. The professor had ultimately spared her from utter embarrassment. He had probably saved many from embarrassment today, yet the other students possibly knew how to school their reactions better than Lavender.

Snape shook with rage as Jace grinned toothily, at the now halfway melted table. Harry mused if Jace were a student, Snape would have unquestionably hacked off hundreds of points, right before kicking him out of the dungeon classroom. Harry looked between him, Jace, and at the reactions of the Celestials, which were amused, compared to the Slytherins, which were furious at the Celestial for discomfiting their head of house. The young wizard leaned close to the ear of Kaltag, stifling his laughter.

"Is he always like this?" Kaltag beamed and nodded avidly.

"Always melts cauldrons just to prove a point." Ron smiled widely at Kaltag and pat him on the back.

"I don't see us having any trouble in potions at all this year, mates." He replied. Harry readily agreed, before watching the silent

exchange between the two professors. Jace cleaned up his demonstration's mess and repaired the table. Snape seethed at the man before violently whipping his head around to face his class.

"What are you all gawking at?" he screeched. "Get back to work!" There was a loud scramble of noise as the students got back to their potions, Lavender quickly adding several ingredients before finally adding the venom, which in turn, did not dissolve her cauldron. Jace finished up and shrunk his potions case again, throwing Snape a celebratory grin. Snape was undoubtedly upset the younger professor thwarted his hopeful insults for the day.

"Ten points to Gryffindor and Paraffin since Hermione answered the question correctly." He stated. The witch nodded her thanks and resumed her work. Harry carefully drained his vial of venom before tossing a phial of Runespoor scales in, beaming proudly as his potion reached the desired color of pale blue. Hermione and Kaltag already bottled and labeled their potions before handing them to Snape, who oddly snatched it from Hermione's hand. When it came to taking Kaltag's concoction, he eyed the boy with an impassive expression and carefully took his parchment and work. Harry and Ron were just about done and quickly packed their things up after turning their assignments in. As the burning Snape and witty Jace surveyed the class at their separate posts, Harry caught the words directed at the Hogwarts instructor from the Aripedes potion master.

"You're a right old bat, you are." He giped at Snape, not sparing a look to the man, before working the aisles to make sure everything was in order. Snape merely lifted his thick eyebrow and produced a small, challenging smirk in response.

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The Paradors were all too keen on gossiping about their first Potions/Remedies class of the year to their friends. Jace was quickly becoming the Celestial teacher favorite of the Gryffindors, who were excited to finally have an equal match for their wicked potions master. Most girls were quickly growing to be completely besotted with the man, now that his wit and charm meshed with his dashing good looks. The boys, naturally, ignored the girls and assured they did not feel threatened by the fit Remedies instructor.

Yet the anticipated class of the day was yet to occur, as the sixth years found themselves making the familiar trek to the defense corridor, to finally meet their new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor. Those who had him beforehand, such as the seventh and fifth years (Ginny wasn't talking), kept to themselves about how their class went. Harry was quickly sorting through notions that he was yet another evil henchmen out to get him, since no one informed them about imposter Moody's class in his fourth year.

"Well, they're not saying he's bad or good," Hermione deduced. "But there isn't anything to make him out to be after you, Harry." Ron and Harry gave the Gryffindor a disbelieving look.

"There never is, Hermione." Harry glumly replied. "Quirrell—such a nice, pitiful man, but he had a few dual personality issues." Ron snickered and motioned for him to continue. "Lockhart—arrogant, and a fraud who wanted to wipe my memory." Hermione gave a weak grimace and blushed at the memory of the prettiest defense teacher by far they experienced at Hogwarts.

"And who conditioned daily." Ron added, earning a painful pinch from Hermione.

"Lupin was fine—lest we forget he chased me and Hermione down as a werewolf." He added as an afterthought.

"You can't blame him for that," Hermione hissed. "He wasn't aware—"

"I know," Harry pointed out. "Just observing. Of course, there was Moody-Crouch, who handed me over to Voldemort," he made a face at the memory. "Forgot to send him a thank you card for that vacation." Ron quirked an eyebrow whereas Hermione lightly scowled. "And who can forget Umbridge. Between Dementors, fake Veritaserum, the abuse of detention, and almost cursing me with the Cruciatus, what's to say she wasn't the worst of them?" Ron scratched his head and adjusted a red lock.

"Well, we haven't met this Kenward fellow," he put in. "He could be worse than all of them combined." Harry looked at him pensively.

"A narcissist possessed by Voldemort, who is also a dark creature in disguise, spy for the Dark Lord, works for the ministry and is after



me?" Harry summarized, shrugging. "Could be." The three continued to walk to the defense classroom until a familiar face raced up behind them.

"Hello, Kaltag," Hermione greeted. "Where've you been?" Two more faces emerged behind them.

"Looking for us." Nikola stated.

"Yes," Starbuck took his place at Hermione's side. "My dear brother here decided to grab us from the common room and announce Defense was in a few minutes." Ron eyed Starbuck suspiciously and returned his gaze back to the corridor.

"Ah," Hermione responded. "Lazing about?" Starbuck shook his head.

"No, not really." He answered. "Brushing up on some things."

"Hey," Kaltag began. "Do you think Professor Chiron will be helping the defense teacher, since Jace is paired with Snape?" The others took on pondering looks as they tried to craft a remedy to his query.

"Doubt it," Nikola spoke first. "Our defense is somewhat different than theirs." Kaltag nodded.

"True." They finally reached the horde of students crowding the classroom door, and entered the large, spacious room. It was as Harry had seen it in the last five years, only expanded larger, like the potions laboratory. Dozens upon dozens of tables of three filled the room in rows, forming an arch around, what seemed to be a massive dais, which was placed before a small desk. Kaltag fidgeted with his necklace and viewed the skeletons of various magical creatures suspended from the ceiling.

There were many more Gryffindor sixth years, including Seamus, and Neville, along with Parvati. The mystery girl was also present, sitting with Isabella Lancaster and Tam Xu, the smartest girls of Voltaire. The sextet was annoyed with the fact that Draco Malfoy, Androcles Xenik and some unfamiliar company sat at the back tables, claiming the back desks for Slytherin and Aves. Harry noted the class was also mixed, with Ravenclaws, Voltaires, Hufflepuffs,

and Brittlebores. He was also pleased to note the entire sixth year Defense Association was present.

"Most of the DA's here," Ron vocalized. "You did a swell job, mate." Hermione beamed and pat Harry on the back, leading them to the free front tables. Most of them had been taken up by swooning girls, not to mention Lavender and Parvati, who were both applying blush and various female facial concealers to their faces. Harry took his seat between Kaltag and Ron, and Nikola between Hermione and the ebony wavy-haired Paraffin. Starbuck had opted to take a seat behind them, with a Voltaire and a Brittlebore. The Entity and Gryffindor witch smiled at their tablemate before throwing Kaltag an impish look.

"Why, hello, Endymion." Nikola stressed the Entity's name. "Glad you're here." Kaltag rapidly turned a strange shade of crimson, opening his defense book and wishing against hope to meld into the background and not be noticed. Harry and Ron exchanged shrewd looks and hushed their straining laughter. Endymion beamed faultlessly at her roommate.

"Thanks for sitting with me. Thought I'd be alone." She stated, opening her book as well. "Selene and Amara told me this class was captivating," she explained. "Whatever that meant." Hermione agreed.

"Yes, I'm quite anxious to see what we will be learning today," she declared. "I wonder what he'll teach." Nikola flipped her short hair and grinned at the boys. Harry and Ron were barely following their tepid conversation, whilst Kaltag adjusted his cloak to cover part of his face from view.

"Oh, Endymion," she sing-songed. "I don't believe you've met Ron and Harry," she introduced the males, who greeted her with a warm smile and a wave. Nikola's roguish eyes flickered to her brother. "But I do believe you've met Kaltag?" The boy in question closed his eyes for a few seconds before removing his cloak from around his face and throwing Endymion a forced smile.

"Hullo, Endymion." He acknowledged. The girl smirked amusedly and tucked a loose raven strand behind her ear somewhat nervously.

"Hiya, Kaltagonus." She hailed. The Being wrung his hands in his lap at the uncomfortable silence following. The din of conversation was a dull roar spread through the tight air of the classroom. Endymion rocked to some unheard tune while Harry, Ron, Hermione and a charmed Nikola glimpsed between the two.

"So," Kaltag started after a long pause. "How's your sister?" Harry could see Endymion seemed slightly put out by the question, but answered it with poise.

"Selene is fine, thank you." She confirmed. Another uncomfortable stillness between the two.

"That's—that's good...to know." Kaltag toyed with his silver chain during the next bout of silence. Harry could feel the tension radiating in anxious waves off of Kaltag; he truly did fancy this Endymion Magnus.

"What about Potions this morning?" Endymion chuckled forcefully. "Jace sure showed Snape up, didn't he?"

"Well, he had to," Ron interjected. "Snape never teaches us how to brew potions. He could have saved hundreds of melted cauldrons if he only taught us." Harry considered Ron's comment; it was true. Snape never took the time to teach his students the basics of potions and what not to do. The man left the students to fend for themselves, and leered in amusement as they screwed up. He would have been a better potions student if Snape put forth the effort into being a better professor.

"Shh, here he comes!" Parvati squealed excitedly. Many faces turned to the now ajar office door at the top landing in the classroom. Professor Kenward rested regally on the stone banister, surveying the students below him with inscrutable brown eyes. Most girls fixed their hair at the last minute and threw the man brilliant smiles, to which he smirked. Silence rang over the classroom, creeping up Harry's spine at the chilling peace. The room was too quiet, and extremely uncomfortable. Kenward trotted down the steps without saying a word, his tweed cloak hanging off of his boxy shoulders. As he reached the ground floor, the man unraveled the cord tying the robe to his neck, and pulled it off, tucking the cloak neatly in his arms. His russet shoes clacked along the wooden floor, breaking the

stillness of the class. To his left side, Lavender and Parvati were fixing their robes and grinning like dumb models.

Kenward wore a tan dress shirt, covered with a coffee-hued rayon vest, plain dark brown tie, and coffee-colored trousers and matching shoes. A thick gold chain hung from his vest pocket to his pants pouch, no doubt housing a pocket watch of some sort. A platinum chain was tucked into his shirt, and barely visibly gripping the nape of his neck. The professor carefully set his cloak on the back of his swiveling chair and eyed the students through his twinkling brown orbs, before taking his place in his seat and rolling himself under his dark cherry desk. On his desk was a thin folder, two textbooks, and a low stack of parchments with a quill and inkbottle. Kenward opened the black, glossy folder, and read over the parchment. Ron and Kaltag fidgeted nervously beside Harry, who watched the man's every move. He wouldn't be as careless as he was for the last five years. If this man were truly an enemy or hiding a secret, he'd watch his every move and get to know him well. Keep your friends close, and your enemies practically handcuffed to your wrist, after all. Harry narrowed his eyes as the professor cleared his throat.

"Ahem," he coughed. "Hannah Abbott?" The meek Hufflepuff acknowledged the man with a quiet confirmation. "Circe Balthazar?" The beautiful girl nonchalantly tossed her hair and presented herself. Susan Bones and Areus Burnum, a hard-faced Aves, were next, when Kenward called out an unknown name. "Ella Burton?"

"Present." The red-haired Gryffindor girl acknowledged from her seat, before delving back into her textbook. Numerous classmates turned to get a good look at the girl, even Malfoy and the Slytherins, who were eyeing her with interest. Kenward continued going through the fifty names on his list, confirming Harry's assumption that all sixth year Defense Association members were present in the class. Parvati, Lavender, and a few other females let out odd giggles and titters when their names rolled off the professor's tongue. Kenward appeared unfazed, much to Hermione—and Ron and Harry's—pleasure. At least they knew he wasn't another Lockhart. Snapping his file shut and lifting a few parchments off the desk, Kenward stood and read over them before casually leaning on the front of his desk. Lavender sighed contentedly and leaned on her wrists.

"I'd like to welcome and congratulate you all for passing your tests—O.W.L.s and F.O.R.C.E.s—and gaining entry into Defense Against

the Dark Arts." He greeted. "My name is Liam Menadue Kenward, so you may call me Professor Kenward, Professor Menadue, Professor K, or just plain 'professor.'" Several girls giggled overbearingly, causing Nikola, Hermione and Ron to roll their eyes and glare at them.

"Oh, brother." Harry muttered. Kenward's eyes scanned the list again.

"I come from Scotland, but I've been raised around various places in Europe." He continued. "And of course, I look forward to guiding you all through an assortment of functional spells, hexes, jinxes, and curses this year." He said all of this while reading the parchment and shaking his head. Harry vaguely wondered if he had written it all out before he had their class. But the panache with which he spoke, the lilting rhythm, that was a kind of rhapsody of intrigued boredom, kept him attentive. "Hmm. As of now, I've quite a colorful list—or rather criminal record sheet of your preceding teachers." Ron snorted.

"Yep, colorful's the word, all right...." Harry nodded and replaced his view on Kenward. The man thumbed through the stack of parchments.

"Possession, fraud, dark creature inhabitant, disguised Death Eater, corrupt ministry worker," he read with a peculiarity of glee. "What next? Blood thirsty crossbow murderer?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I don't know, are you?" Ron spoke out, louder than he would have liked. His face paled a bit in shock as Kenward set his brown eyes on him. Hermione threw Ron an upset look before shaking her head. Harry tried to hold in his laughter, as did Kaltag, for their friend's sake. A few scattered chuckles were heard around the room and the boys sighed in relief when Kenward was one of them.

"Not recently, no," he joked. "There was this one occasion with a vampire, though...." He pensively rapped on his chin, his eyes locked on the decorated ceiling, before smiling warmly and flinging the papers onto his desk. He folded his arms across his chest and looked around the class. "Professor Dumbledore gave me good ravings of this class, and a previous instructor—Professor Lupin, you may remember—left the subsequent professors notes on how good a job you all did in his class. In my opinion, he was a very qualified professor out of all of your others." Harry smiled brightly at

Kenward's words. Lupin was his favorite defense teacher of all time; he would have been happy to hear Kenward's comments. A loud scoff was heard in the back. The class collectively turned to face the source of the scoff, none other than Draco Malfoy and his sneering housemates.

"Lupin was a dark creature," he jeered. "Hardly qualified to teach anyone." Harry was irked by the Slytherin's words and clenched his fists under the desk. Malfoy never relinquished the chance to mock and degrade Lupin. Kenward frowned at Malfoy.

"How now, Mr. Malfoy?" he inquired. "It isn't the situation or the creature, no matter how dark or light they might be. But the person." He enlightened. "Maybe Quirrell, the turban-toting freak was of more to your liking," Quite a few loud chortles were met with this comment, which brought a smile to Kenward's face. Malfoy's façade contorted with annoyance. "Or maybe you, Mr. Malfoy, were charmed with Gilderoy Lockhart's winning smile. Or perhaps you took the lessons of imposter Moody's classes to heart. I seem to have heard a rumor of his corridor transfigurations on students."

Malfoy's pale face became more pallid at the indirect mention of his escapade as a pure white ferret. Harry could clearly see that day in his mind's eye, as Moody transformed Malfoy and bobbed him along the stone floor and walls. Ron raucously guffawed, turning red in the face; the wizarding students who also figured it out looked no better than he. Hermione hid behind her hand, but Harry could see she also found this hilarious. Kenward's eyes glittered mischievously and he smiled and the laughter died down.

"Perhaps you enjoyed ministry authority under Umbridge." Many hisses were heard from a number of students. "It's your opinion, Mr. Malfoy. Whomever you enjoyed instruction under is of your choice." With those words, the discussion was closed.

"Instruction under You-Know-Who, probably." Harry whispered to Ron, who barely nodded. Harry was liking this man more and more. So far, he gave no indication of supporting the ministry or Voldemort. But even the most brilliant roses have those irksome thorns....

"Now, we'll be working on your textbook's spells, as they are on the N.E.W.T.s, and a few off to the side spells." Kenward informed. "As you can see, we will mostly be demonstrating what we learn onto

this dueling platform, and we will occasionally have duels in this classroom for points or house glory. In example, if I assign an eighteen-inch essay, I will allow one member of each house to duel for the chance to let their entire house off of the assignment." Cheers and applaud met the man's method, and Harry found himself and Ron the loudest of the bunch, furiously clapping with his classmates. The Gryffindor could tell Hermione disliked the idea, and she probably would do the homework anyway, for 'preparation.' Kenward chuckled in low tones as the ovation settled down. "Winners of the first duels compete, and whoever wins the final, will be at liberty from the homework assignment."

"Brilliant." Kaltag mumbled brightly. Kenward shuffled a few papers behind him on his desk, before reading an excerpt to himself and addressing the class.

"It has also come to my attention from Professor Dumbledore," he started. "That due to the conflicting and hectic term of last, an exciting opportunity presented itself." Harry folded his arms on his desk and hung onto Kenward's words. "Because of all the Ministry of Magic's ridiculous decrees last year, many things were questioned and banned because of the self-imposed High Inquisitor. By the way, if you didn't know, all decrees have been overturned, so there really isn't anything to worry about."

"Good show." Ron murmured to Harry. Kenward overlooked the class with an odd gleam in his eyes. Clinching his hands together in his lap, he grinned beguilingly.

"Tell me," he began. "Those of you who know what I am talking about: what have you learned in the last five year in all of your defense classes? And I would love to especially know about a certain illegal Defense society, which most likely is responsible for most of the students in my class today." Harry could feel the blood leaving his face and making it ashen, as Kenward's brown eyes lingered on his green ones. He knew? Dumbledore told him? Ron nudged Harry and was just as pale as he was. At the next table, Hermione looked a bit shocked and somewhat frazzled. Malfoy and company scowled and softly seethed at the Gryffindor and his friends. Harry could feel the stares of his club mates boring into his cloaked back, watching him in confusion. Most waiting for him to give the go ahead so they could begin bragging. They would all wait to see if their leader said anything before they unintentionally

revealed too much. All were intensely loyal to the Boy-Who-Lived. Kenward smiled at someone in the back. "Ah, Mr. Smith?"

Well.

Not everyone was loyal.

Ron turned to glare at the overconfident Hufflepuff, shaking his head at the grating boy. Of course Zacharias would brag about the club. His mouth was both a blessing and a curse.

"Well, we learned basic theory with Quirrell," he replied haughtily. "Dark creatures with Lupin. Unforgivables with Moody." Harry was lightened the boy didn't mention—"And in the DA, basic skills such as the Disarming Spell, small jinxes, the Reductor Curse, the Impediment Jinx, and ended with the Patronus Charm. You're right; none of us would be here without it."

Never mind.

Next to Smith, Justin Finch-Fletchley slapped his palm on his forehead and shook his head. Harry felt distilled anger coursing through his veins. Smith really needed to know how to keep his mouth shut. Draco Malfoy and company glared at Harry, narrowing their cold eyes into slits. Of course, most of the wizards and witches were grateful to Harry Potter for helping them get this far. Zacharias beamed pompously. At least he didn't declare—

"Right, Potter?" he threw in to finish. Harry groaned and massaged his eyes, trying not to look at Zacharias right now. He dimly heard Justin mumbling to the boy, "Subtlety, Smith. Subtlety." Ron was without a doubt ready to pummel Smith into the ground without remorse. Kenward seemed amused by the whole thing.

"All right, I can see your leader has taught you all very well." He smirked at the ill-looking Harry.

"I'm going to kill Smith." Harry grumbled to Ron.

"After I do." He muttered back, glowering at the boy who was receiving many death glares from his club mates. Kaltag leaned on the desk next to Harry.



"You have to tell me about this DA, Harry." He spoke. "If it's still on, I'll definitely join." Harry smiled lazily at Kaltag.

"After this class, I doubt we'll have a DA. Thanks to bigmouth back there." Kenward went on to name some of the things they would learn this year, while Zacharias continued to glance around the classroom, utterly confused at why the members of the Defense Association wanted to pound him.

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Dinner was a buzzing affair as word of Snape and Jace's authoritative face-off broke like a dam over the entire school. Snape scowled at his steak and chewed unfeelingly, as Professor Jace merrily sat next to the Aripedes History of Celestiaity teacher, Professor Perseus Einar. The Remedies instructor began many attempts to crack a smile on either man's face, to no avail.

Kenward chatted with Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall, while the other instructors spoke amongst themselves. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat with each other, facing the Smythe triplets and engulfing dinner. Ron was slothfully swirling at his potatoes and complaining about the future of the Defense Association, while Harry indifferently listened to him. The Gryffindor was occupied with watching the new Gryffindor, Ella Burton, as she sat with Endymion and Isis farther down the table.

It was the first time she was present at a public meal in the great hall, and Harry could easily tell she was disturbed by it. The way she forced a smile at the inane jokes executed by Colin or Dennis, and how she picked at her chicken. She fooled others with her content happiness on the outside, but Harry wasn't easily hoodwinked. Something was different about her, and one could see it in her bright, honey-colored eyes. Many Gryffindor males stared at her with keen interest, not to mention those of other houses. True, she was breathtaking and elegant, and a mystery Harry definitely wouldn't mind solving.

"So, when's the next meeting?" Kaltag interrupted over the table, flicking grains of rice at Icarus a few Gryffindors over. Harry drew his eyebrows in thought before shaking his head.

"Dunno." He answered. "Not sure." Kaltag frowned.

"Where are the meeting usually held?" Harry narrowed his eyes absently at the Being and wiped at his eyes, facing the Paraffin.

"A secret room on the seventh floor." He answered. "I should take you there one day." Kaltag nodded, and dodged the piece of dinner roll the other Paraffin prefect lobbed at him.

"I'll remind you." He grinned, before frowning. "I wonder when Arthur's calling practice. Be right back." Kaltag stood from his seat and walked a great distance down the dark cherry meal table, nearer to the head table. He slipped between a Black seventh year Paraffin and another thin, Greek Being, talking in low tones to the two.

"Practice?" Ron repeated, pushing his plate away. "Oy, Harry, what about Quidditch?" Harry gave the prefect a small smile.

"Only two days into classes and already you're on about Quidditch." He replied. Ron opened his mouth to retort but was interrupted.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall's stern voice cut in. She stood in all her formidable magnificence behind the sixth years with a light unyielding expression on her wizened countenance. "If you would please follow me." She did not wait for the boys to stumble off the bench and trail her, Hermione giving them reassuring glances from her seat. Harry's eyes skimmed over the Gryffindors, and Ginny, who was beside Hermione with a great smile, laughing with Yorick's younger sisters. As he and Ron trudged out of the hall, Harry's green eyes inattentively fell on Ella Burton, who oddly, watched as the boys left behind Professor McGonagall. Her expression was giving nothing away, but Harry did not read more into it as he had more pressing matters at hand.

They exited the hall and walked after their head of house, both boys shooting confusing expressions to each other. Their eyes shot question after silent question off at the other, neither coming up with an answer. Surely nothing happened in Potions to get them in trouble. And in defense—they were only joking about bumping off Zacharias Smith. Nothing out of the ordinary in the words of a teen-aged boy. They approached the well-known transfiguration corridor before McGonagall stopped at a recognizable door. Muttering a password, McGonagall left the boys to follow her in and shut the

door. She sat behind her desk and settled in, eyeing the standing nervous boys. Harry observed the Quidditch Cup displayed proudly in her office, behind her desk.

"Have a seat, gentlemen." She gestured, pulling out the familiar tartan tin box. "Biscuit?" she offered. Ron and Harry anxiously took one each, and chewed mechanically. Harry wondered if McGonagall took her cue from Dumbledore who relentlessly offered his office guests the sour lemon drops upon every visit. Thinking back to why he and Ron was here, Harry shot his best friend a last look before McGonagall cleared her throat, gazing both boys to attention. "As you know, Mr. Potter, you were banned from Quidditch last year due to—unpleasant circumstances." She spoke as if she tasted something revolting. The Gryffindor knew the mere memory of Umbridge made the Transfiguration professor cringe. "As Ms. Umbridge is no longer an affiliate of this institution, the headmaster has agreed to reinstate your title as Gryffindor Seeker." She allowed a small smile to seep through the cracks of her intrepid mask.

"Congratulations, mate." Ron whispered, patting Harry on his shoulder.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And as you both know, Ms. Johnson, last year's captain, has gone on from this school, leaving the position free." She notified. "Both of you are the oldest years on the team. I would make you, Mr. Potter, captain, since you have been on the team the longest, but I have decided to be fair. Now, I leave the task up to both of you to choose the captain." Harry and Ron's eyes widened. The wizard could see his friend's eyes sparkle with delight and honor at being considered for the position. Harry knew it was what Ron had always wanted to do. He had seen it in the Mirror of Erised their first year, no? He couldn't possibly take it away from his best friend. No matter how much he also wanted it. Ron's face fell.

"No, Professor McGonagall." He declined. "Just give it to Harry. He's been there the longest." Harry made a noise of complaint.

"No way, Ron. I didn't even know the game before I came to Hogwarts." He protested. "You're a brilliant strategist. You take it." McGonagall creased her hands before her watching the discussion between her two students.

"You're a better player, and you've learned a lot from Wood." Ron countered. "If anyone deserves it, it's you." Harry was angering a bit quickly.

"Ron, it's yours. I'm still a dilettante in the sport."

"You? I just started keeping last year."

"You've been playing all your life."

"You're a better and stronger person than I."

"Don't go there."

"Why won't you take it?" Ron's face was turning a bit red.

"Because the position was made for you." Harry retorted. Ron's face scrunched up.

"I'm not taking the position if you're giving it up out of pity." He spat evenly.

"Pity? I think not!"

"Boys—"

"Then why aren't you taking the job? Scared?"

"Ron, you've got better credentials."

"Boys..." McGonagall tried to interpose.

"Credentials, Potter?" Ron crossed his arms and challenged.

"Your siblings, save Bill and Percy." Harry pointed out, crossing his arms.

"You call that experience?" Ron raised an eyebrow.

"Misters Weasley and Potter." McGonagall ground out, getting their attention. "Why don't you two work this out on your own and let me

know later?" Harry glanced at Ron and their eyes met briefly. With similar smiles they turned to their head of house.

"No need, professor." Harry began. McGonagall's face wavered.

"Excuse me? Why?" Ron grinned with a dog-like beam.

"Harry and I have decided to become co-captains." He revealed. McGonagall was taken aback, and she divided her accusing gazes between them both.

"And when did you two decide this?" she demanded. They shrugged.

"A few moments ago." Ron answered. "Harry'll captain the Slytherin and Ravenclaw matches—"

"And Ron will oversee the Hufflepuff match and Quidditch Final." Harry ended. McGonagall raised a graying brow.

"So sure, are you?" Harry simply smirked.

"We know you're fond of seeing that trophy in your office," he pointed to the Quidditch Cup on its uplifting shelf overlooking her office. "So it's only fair if we've planned ahead." McGonagall smiled genially and stood to walk around her desk, to a door Harry hadn't noticed before. She entered the small room and Harry heard her rummage through some things. Seconds later, she reemerged clutching Harry's pride and joy.

Polished to a bright shine in the candlelight, McGonagall's crinkled hands grasped Harry's Firebolt. It didn't look like it had a scratch or nick on it. In fact, it appeared as if McGonagall spent every day of her summer polishing the expensive broom personally to perfection.

"It was brought into my care after it was taken, Mr. Potter." She explained. Harry took his broom with trembling hands and stared at it as though he had never seen it before. "It is with its rightful owner, and now, I must continue with some work. Congratulations Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley. I have the pitch already booked for Friday evening at five until dinner. The remaining team can have a meeting and warm up. Do not forget, you two must choose new replacement chasers." Harry and Ron nodded grimly, Harry still lost in his Firebolt. "I expect tryouts to be within the next week or so, as the match is the

weekend before Halloween." She smiled widely at the boys. "Good luck this year, boys. I'd hate to hand the cup back to one my colleagues. I think its grown quite fond of my mantle." The boys grinned as McGonagall dismissed them, and they headed back to the tower, Harry gripping his Firebolt fiercely.

"Well, that was unexpected." He spoke to Ron in the silence between them. The muffled roar of the students at dinner in the Great Hall resounded behind them as they made their way to Gryffindor tower. Ron nodded, ruffling his ginger hair.

"Yeah, it was." He responded. "Thanks, Harry." The Boy-Who-Lived was puzzled.

"For what?" Ron uncomfortably shifted in his gait.

"For agreeing to become co-captain. You should have been the real captain, you know." He confessed, finding fascination in his shoes. Harry smirked.

"You're bloody right." He joked. Ron chortled and playfully shoved Harry. "'Captain Potter' glides off the tongue nicer than 'Captain Weasley.'"

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A/N: Revised chapter.

Next chapter, you'll see:

- 1). Quidditch practice. And more Celestial stuff.
- 2). The awkward return of Vicky—er, Viktor Krum....
- 3). DA mayhem....

Read and review, dedicated S.P.E.W. members!

## Chapter Ten: Of Quaffles & Children

Long, alabaster fingers touched their counterparts' tips as he vigilantly eyed the sputtering man across from him. Weeks. He had given him weeks. And all he came back with was his ever-stammering tongue, blubbing about his non-successful mission. Why did he try his patience so? Tapping his willowy digits together, crimson eyes glared at the portly, quivering man in pitch-black garb. Harry narrowed his eyes into malevolent slits. This was a waste of time.

"Wormtail," his high, icy voice interrupted in displeasure. The Death Eater flinched harshly at Harry's tone and shuddered more. Harry sneered angrily at the man, lowering his invisible brows plastered on his white face under his hood. "You have had weeks. Upon weeks, upon weeks, and have wasted valuable time." His chilling voice hissed. Wormtail quavered, his beady eyes shooting to the darkened door on the other side of the room. Vermilion embers glowed ominously in the fireplace, a final result of the flames burning from the protracted night prior. Small flecks of light peeked through the moth-eaten velvet drapes baring the sun from view, illuminating insignificant parts of the room. Harry's lip curled in disgust and fury. "Explain yourself." The words came out in a deadly whisper, causing the minion to involuntarily whimper. With a sick sense of satisfaction, Harry smirked notwithstanding himself.

"M-My lord," his squeaky voice stuttered. "W-We have g-g-gone t-to the muse-museum, b-b-but have found n-n-nothing." Harry felt the fire of his anger well up within. "Y-Your ally d-does n-n-n-not b-b-buh—"

"Out with it, peon." He seethed. The servant cringed, and twisted his hands before him nervously.

"He d-d-doesn't b-b-believe these w-weapons exist anymore." Wormtail finally admitted. "He d-deems it imp-impossible t-to f-f-find." Harry scowled. Obviously, his men were not searching hard enough. Wormtail grimaced at his master's expression, shaking harder than he had before. Harry, of course, noticed this and it only served to irk him more.

"Be still, Pettigrew." He fumed. "I will not have you sniveling in my company." The Death Eater produced a tiny sob in response, stilling

at his master's behest. Harry's steepled fingers glided separately to the musty arms of his stiff, burgundy chair. His eyes slid to the struggling Death Eater, attempting to restrain his urge to bawl and convulse before his master. Pathetic excuse for a wizard. "You will continue the hunt," he ordered in a no nonsense tone. "Bearing in mind that I am your master, and I say when things can, and cannot be found. These weapons are the key to my victory in this war." He pointed a long, skeletal finger at the pudgy wizard. "This is your last chance, Wormtail. The next time you are before me, the words that fall out of your mouth better pertain to the location of those weapons." The man sniffed roughly, containing his impulse to cry, nodding furiously and bowing low.

"Y-Yes, m-m-master," he obeyed sycophantically. "I p-promise, m-master." Harry glowered at the man.

"And it would also be prudent to grow a backbone." He giped. "None of your peers seem to have gone wrong with theirs." The pawn to evil quaked before bowing as low as a house elf.

"I-I-I w-will, g-good master...."

"That sword, and that scepter will be—"

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Harry sat up quickly, only to shield his eyes from the bright sun overhead, massaging his aching side. The blue sky extended over the land, with puffy, ivory clouds dotting the canvas. Underneath him, the short, jade blades of grass poked him through his robes like dull needles; he ran a hand through his hair, pulling out stray pieces of lawn. He rubbed his scar as it prickled painfully, and looked into the brown eyes of a worried Ron Weasley. His red-haired friend regarded him carefully.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked carefully, sitting up from his laid back position. Harry lowered his brows, looking over at the line of students lying on their backs. Today had been their first study in Divination class, and they were studying Chaomancy with Celestial Professor Cassand. Kaltag sat on the other side of Ron and was jotting something down on a sheet of parchment. As Harry grazed his fingers lightly across his scar, Ron's eyes widened. "You-Know-Who?" he whispered. Nodding, Harry and Ron quickly grabbed their



parchments and wrote something, just as Professor Cassand passed them by. "What happened?"

"Must've dozed off," Harry confessed quietly, writing in a prediction for a cloud that resembled a torch. "He was talking about his nameless ally and the...the weapons." Ron nodded, glancing quickly at a puffy cloud floating overhead.

"We've still got them, right?" he asked the Gryffindor Seeker. Harry thought for a moment, his eyes wandering to Ella Burton, lying on her stomach in the grass.

"I can only assume," he answered, his green eyes following the redhead Gryffindor girl, deeply immersed in her writing. "He still has Wormtail looking for it." He swept the feather of his quill over his scar in a soothing motion, hoping to lessen the throbbing. "He was really upset they haven't found it." Ron let out a chuckle after Cassand glided by again.

"We must have really hidden it well," he surmised. "To make him so mad they can't find it. Did he say the names of them?" A gentle breeze sifted through, rustling their papers. Harry, Ron and Kaltag clung to theirs, as a few Ravenclaws and Neville, shouted and raced to grab their flying parchments. Harry frowned deeply, bending his quill in thought.

"No. Just that they're a sword and a scepter," he whispered, his utensil falling back to the parchment to write, as Cassand glanced their way. Ron bobbed his head, letting him know he caught what the weapons were. "He said they'd help him win the war." The prefect turned to his best friend briefly.

"D'you think they'll help us win the war since we have them?" he queried. At Harry's frustrated shrug, the student returned to his parchment, tersely gazing up at a passing cloud. "According to my cloud," Ron began in a considering tone, "which looks like a mandrake—horrible little snotters—an amusing death of an abstract nature will occur in a few days." Harry gave Ron an incredulous look, writing in his own portent.

"There's nothing remotely amusing about death, Ron." He pointed out bitterly. Ron shrugged.

"Maybe a gnome, or a mandrake will die. That's amusing. Never know." Ron reread his statement, his eyes brightening with a new notion. "It's abstract. Maybe Snape'll lose his snarky attitude."

"Doubt it." Harry and Kaltag spoke in unison, neither looking up from their writings. Ron frowned at each boy in turn.

"At least give my hopeful thoughts a chance, you gits." He muttered foully.

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Ron and Harry sat in a corner of the common room, their heads hunched over a sheet of parchment. The lounge was humming with low, meaningless prattle, topics ranging from homework to the latest edition of Witch Weekly. Hermione remained nearby with Ginny and Nikola, all poring over different subjects of homework.

"So we've got these spots to fill," Ron continued. "Two chasers and one beater, now that Sloper's out." The boy had decided to step down from his beater goals, as he found the sport of Quidditch to be much more entertaining as a spectator. Harry sighed in annoyance. They both needed to find replacements for the team, now that the beater sprang the news on them.

"Kirke must adjust himself with a new partner." He grumbled. "I haven't even played with Ginny or Kirke. It's like building a team from scratch. He might as well throw in the towel, too." Ron frowned at his best friend.

"Don't jinx it, Harry." He scolded. "Kirke's not dropping out. He loves the position too much to do so." Harry numbly agreed, before turning to face the stairwell. Starbuck and Yorick walked down the steps and settled themselves at a nearby table, and were followed by Icarus, Kaltag and Thanos. Kaltag clutched his thin, silver notebook again with his bag and sat with Ron and Harry.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked, looking at their mess of parchments adorning the table. Both Gryffindors shook their heads and cleared space for the Celestial. Sitting down with a sigh, Kaltag put his notebook on the table and unexpectedly flipped it open. To Harry's surprise, it revealed a wide screen and a keyboard. A small logo sat on the bottom right hand corner under the keyboard, and the boy

pressed a shiny, round, platinum button above the typing board. As he began to unpack his knapsack, Ron took an interest in the object and leaned over Harry. The young wizard had never been allowed near the Dursleys'—or rather, Dudley's—computer, but at times when they were away or busy, he'd have a go on it. He knew many of the basics, he just wasn't proficient.

"What is it?" Kaltag opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by an annoying Hermione.

"You can't use those here, you know," she spoke knowledgeably. "Hogwarts' magic interferes with all Muggle electronics." Kaltag simply smiled at the girl and pulled out more books. Harry paid more attention to the laptop, and watched as it effortlessly switched to the password screen.

"Then why is it coming on?" the Gryffindor countered. "Doesn't look like there's any interference to me." Hermione's smug grin wavered, and she stood from her seat to eye the small screen. Glancing quickly between Kaltag and the laptop, her brows furrowed.

"How can it be? I read in Hogwarts, A History, that—"

"Well, maybe that book needs to be revised." Ron teased. The female prefect's glare made her cheeks glow angrily. Harry could sense an argument looming between the two, and apparently, so could Kaltag.

"It's not a laptop," he started. "Not really. It's an Olympic Link, or oLink for short." His fingers moved rapidly as he typed in a password. "It connects Celestials to the Olympic Network, so we can find out further information for our assignments." Hermione rubbed her lip pensively, while Ron slowly tapped on the 'P' key.

"How can it work here?" Hermione queried, eyeing the oLink furtively with something akin to contempt.

"It runs off Celestial energy," the Paraffin prefect answered. "From a special battery at the Olympic Links store in Aristedes Square. It can be recharged through a Being or Entity's forces." Ginny came to the table to get a better view, while Nikola continued on her work.

"We've all got one. Just haven't got around to using it yet," she explained. "Mine is light pink. Star's is Paraffin blue." Ginny took a closer look at the machine.

"You say it can get information about any topic?" she inquired, lifting a red brow. The Being nodded, scrolling with his Touch-Pad to open some files.

"Anything." Ron snorted and shook his head at his sister.

"Type in 'available boys,'" he grumbled. "Maybe Ginny'll find a whole list of them." The youngest Weasley glared and faced Kaltag. Hermione's face contorted a bit with annoyance.

"So, in essence, you can get any answer for homework from here." She summarized. Kaltag inclined his head reluctantly.

"Pretty much." Narrowing her eyes, Hermione returned to her abandoned books, clinging to them while glaring at the offending oLink. Ron took in the oLink from all angles and contours.

"Yep," he concluded. "We need one of these at Hogwarts. Snape wouldn't have a choice but to pass us."

"That's if they have wizard topics." Harry added, making his best friend frown with worry. Kaltag resumed his clacking of keys as he typed.

"They do." Kaltag grinned. "And oddly enough, most of them are Potions."

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Harry sat at lunch the next day, distractedly glancing at various people in the great hall. Luna was shaping the mashed potatoes on her plate into some sort of sculpture; Neville, Dean and Seamus were conversing loudly on their favorite Quidditch teams; Justin and Ernie from Hufflepuff were talking with Prashin Singh and Proteus Naiad from Brittlebore. He stifled a pitiful laugh as he eyed Cho and Michael snuggling at the Ravenclaw table, Tam Xu and Etienne Flannery from Voltaire shooting the others uncomfortable looks from across the table. The wizards and witches had been from the Defense Association, which Harry sleeplessly thought about the

previous night. He knew he was continuing with the organization, be it illegal or no, but he couldn't discount the Celestials.

The Smythes, Icarus, and Thanos openly declared they would join. But Harry only knew them, since they were Paraffins. The others, he had no idea existed. Sure, Kaltag and Starbuck had pointed out a few of their school friends, but never really went into any detail. At his heavy sigh, Kaltag gave him a strange look.

"What's wrong, then?" he asked the Gryffindor. Harry merely shook his head and moved his potatoes around on his plate.

"Thinking," he replied. "About some things." Kaltag nodded, and sipped from his goblet.

"Quidditch practice?" he asked. "It's today, isn't it?" At Harry's nod, he grinned. "It's only your first practice, Harry. Not really official, since you have no full team yet."

"I know that, it's frustrating, is all."

"It always is. I've been assistant captain for two years," Kaltag disclosed. "And Gilliam always puts me in charge of tryouts. It's nerve racking when the fate of the team rests with my decision." Harry looked at the Being oddly. From the Paraffin boys' conversations, he knew Arthur Gilliam was the captain of their Sliatyckx team. Also from Kaltag's earlier descriptions, Harry found the Celestial to be a lot like Wood. "I'm also the one who has to find back-ups for each position. Imagine how our formal practices went; eighteen bodies in the air doing their own thing. That's frustrating."

"How do you manage?"

"That's the thing. You really can't." Harry's face fell and he flicked his gravy at the table. "But you try. And I always had help. You have Ron, and two other members to assist you."

"You're right."

"Always am." Harry playfully tapped Kaltag on his arm and began to find an interest in his food again.

"D'you think maybe we should start training some reserves?" he popped in, over a loud clicking of heels. "You all seem to have your replacements all ready set."

"No harm in being prepared." The Paraffin answered. "I'd start with the older years—like you and Ron—since next year's your last. And if you have any chasers in higher years, then replace them, also."

"Right." They ate for the next few minutes, talking about the two sports and tryouts, when Harry noticed his area was considerably darker.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall's voice made the boy whip around to face his Transfiguration professor. She had the ever-present stern look on her wizened face, and her hands were clasped before her in a business-like manner. "The headmaster would like to see you in his office." As she clicked away, Harry's eyes fell on the head table, noting Dumbledore was nowhere in sight.

"What'd you do now?" Kaltag joked. "It's only the fourth day of school." Harry stepped over the table bench and collected his bag.

"Meet you at the pitch later?"

"Count on it." The young wizard ambled out of the great hall and took the familiar path to the headmaster's office. He had a sick feeling in his stomach, as he remembered the last time he had been there. Out of his fit of rage, Harry had broken and trashed his headmaster's office, furious that he'd led himself and others to a near-death situation.

And it was where he learned of the prophecy.

Perhaps if the old man had told him earlier than assuming he wasn't of proper age to hear it, many things could have been avoided. With some trepidation he realized he was before the stone gargoyle, its eyes piercing through him, as it knew what Harry had done at the end of last school year.

"Er..." of course he didn't know the password. McGonagall hadn't told him anything. He started shooting off names of candies and other sweets off the top of his head, and a small voice in the far reaches of his mind stated that the password might be of a Celestial

candy. No one had told them about the Beings and Entities' favorite sweets, so he may be stuck. It was just like Dumbledore to change the password in salute of another race. "Er, Ice Mice...Bertie Botts...Puking Pastilles!" The boy's brows flew into his hairline as the gargoyle leapt aside and granted him entry. As he ascended the magical escalator, Harry's face scrunched in confusion. "Puking Pastilles...?"

The loud grinding of stone on stone finally ended, as the stairs stopped, and Harry got off and walked toward the double oak doors of Dumbledore's office. Hesitantly, he rapped on the door, nervously scuffing his shoes on the floor.

"You may enter, Harry." Dumbledore's muffled voice proclaimed. Deeply sighing, Harry's hand reached out to grab the brass handle and push the door open, his eyes glued to the floor. His face was met with unnatural warmth about the room, though not from the fireplace. He wondered if Dumbledore was aware his room was so warm, or if the man simply acclimated himself already, not bothering to entertain guests within these four walls. Peeking upward, he spotted Fawkes, the headmaster's phoenix, perched on his roost, a slight trilling emitting from his beak. The bird appeared fairly kempt, his red and gold-feathered breast glossy in the sun and hearth light, brown talons gripping his stand. The last time he had set eyes on the classy phoenix, he had been a fledgling.

In the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

Where he, Dumbledore, and Sirius almost died, not to mention Hermione, Ron, Neville, Ginny and Luna. Blinking quickly to clear his thoughts, Harry focused on the phoenix.

Behind the bird, many bright glimmers caught the sunlight, beckoning Harry's intrigue to seek them out. Harry reluctantly lifted his view to take in the damage he had enacted in late June, but widened his green eyes in alarm. All of the things he had broken had been repaired or replaced, he could not tell; the table, the trinkets, the chairs—everything. They were all shiny, and joyous, like their owner, and gleaming like hundreds of little pearls of light behind Dumbledore.

Harry peered at the portraits of the headmasters and headmistresses of old, all of which were regarding him with caution

and reprimand. Dumbledore sat behind his large desk, his hand clutching a quill and writing on an official-looking parchment, and his half-moon spectacles sliding down his aged nose. Looking up to greet his anxious guest, Dumbledore smiled at the Gryffindor, his blue eyes glittering in the firelight. Harry clutched his bag closer to himself, and wiped his forehead. A slight sweat from the heat seemed to break out over his body. Dumbledore looked cool and unworried, despite the sinewy beard and mass of hair sprouting from his body.

"Have a seat, Harry." Harry obeyed, nervously glancing around him. A few occupants of portraits eyed him furtively, not bothering to conceal their interest. Phineas Nigellus was nowhere to be found, Harry felt some relief at his absence. The headmaster surveyed Harry through his glasses, before setting his quill down and smiling. "How have you been, Mr. Potter?"

"All right, I guess." He uneasily answered. Fawkes preened his expansive reddish-gold wings, warbling a low note in contentment. He absently brought a hand up to swipe sweat off of his forehead when his fingers brushed his scar. The vision. "Actually, sir, I had a vision this morning." Dumbledore's cheerful face faltered, and his eyes darkened.

"Do you remember what it was about, Harry?"

"Voldemort is upset he cannot find the weapons." He blurted out. "His ally also says it was impossible for them to still be in existence." Dumbledore's wiry mass of eyebrows drew together in worry.

"Was he talking to his ally?" Harry shook his head.

"No, Pettigrew, sir." He stated. "Voldemort will stop at nothing to find this sword and this scepter. He says it will gain him victory against us." Harry tugged at his ear. "I hope they are safe enough, professor." Dumbledore nodded in distraction.

"They are, Mr. Potter. They are very well guarded." He looked at Harry. "Was there anything else?" Harry shook his head, messing up his hair once more. With a jovial smile, Dumbledore nodded. "Thank you, Harry. It must be a struggle for you to endure such. This burden." Harry stiffened. If the old coot was about to mention the prophecy, he didn't know what his actions would be. Luckily, the



man smiled again and leaned on his desk. "Enough grave matters. How has your first week gone?" the Gryffindor motioned with his shoulders.

"Fine."

"I see you've made friends with Kaltagonus Smythe and his siblings. No doubt you construed they are Spiridon's children." Harry's smile was small, but content nonetheless. Dumbledore toyed with the neck of his robes in thought before beaming. "Well, on to more important matters." The teenager remained still and perplexed at why he was in the office, before they sidetracked themselves with Voldemort's doings.

"Okay, sir."

"First of all, congratulations to you and Mr. Weasley for making team captains," he praised. "And getting your position reinstated." Harry blushed.

"Thank you, sir, for lifting the ban."

"It was necessary." He responded. There was an uncomfortable silence between the two, in which Harry lessened the grip on his bag, which was turning his knuckles white, and the phoenix ruffled his feathers lightheartedly. Harry viewed a few of the crimson feathers falling to the ground, pushing itself against the conquering air. As he wiped at his somewhat perspiring forehead once more, Dumbledore glanced at his clock. "I know you have class in a few moments, so I will not keep you."

"All right." The younger wizard knew he had Charms in the minutes coming, so he modestly nodded, and shifted his bag higher on his shoulder. The headmaster smiled at the young boy, his eyes bright with something unreadable. Low murmuring could be heard from the paintings on the wall, some shuffling on about Harry's rude behavior in the last few months.

"I had the privilege and honor, last year, to have a student organization in my namesake. Dumbledore's Army?" Harry cringed. He wasn't reamed out last year for it. Fawkes quavered a heartening note before puffing himself up, mocking a red, feathery globe, and settling in his pile of aged ashes. "Furthermore, due to our

ineffectual Defense instructor, you, Mr. Potter, took it upon yourself to assist students in defense, not only for the school, but for themselves. Because of your selfless actions, you went on with this society, against all ministry diktats and regulations. And you helped numbers of students pass the class, and their standardized tests. You should be proud, Harry. I am very proud of you." The teenager's throat was very dry, and his face colored a bit under slight saturation. He had made the headmaster proud. Not just 'proud'; very proud. His lips upturned in a suppressed smile.

"I am, sir." His scratchy, arid throat permitted him to say.

"Though we have a much better teacher for the class as of now, I do not want the organization to disband." Harry's eyes became saucers. Dumbledore actually wanted it to continue? The portraits reached a stint in their conversation, and Harry could only imagine the disbelief with which they eyed the current headmaster. "As I'm sure, you probably would have went on with it anyway," Harry flushed at the truth. "I am giving you permission to continue the Defense Association, with wizards and Celestials alike. I would also like you to extend the invitation to other houses." The Gryffindor knew the headmaster meant Slytherin and Aves. Fawkes trilled in a low, sluggish tone, as if to contradict the headmaster. Harry stifled a chuckle at sensing what the gallant phoenix must have thought, much like he did.

Good luck trying to get those Death Eaters to join.

"All right, sir." Dumbledore nodded in confirmation.

"What do you plan on training in this year, Harry?" The boy was taken aback by the question, as he hadn't really given the group much thought about curriculum. The question came out of the blue, and stumped the Gryffindor.

"Er....Well, sir," he was at a loss for words. "I was going to review the spells from last year, and teach some of the ones Professor Kenward would teach this year at the member's own pace." Harry's eyebrows furrowed in consideration before he shook his head. "But those are sixth year spells. Not exactly for first and second years. And if the group is going to be extended, I'd need a bigger room to house everyone." More and more thoughts and problems arose as Harry's sixteen-year-old mind flooded with issues. "But then the

older years have N.E.W.T.s and Celestial testing. They would be wasting their time learning first year spells."

"How about you leave the first years to Professors Jace and Kenward?" Dumbledore suggested, his fingers steeped under his chin. "Do you plan on separating the groups by year?" Harry's thoughts surged into possible solutions before he shook his head, dropping his bag to the floor. Fawkes pecked at a loose feather, flinging it to the soft scarlet rug underneath his perch.

"No." he replied defeated. That would take too much time and energy. He didn't need someone like Zacharias Smith jeering at him and heading an uprising in the group. "But what if I separate them into classes? Three....Novices—first and second years with Professors Jace and Kenward. Intermediates or those in between with, say...Hermione or a trusted seventh year. And the Advanced or Elite classes with the stronger and more adept members?" he offered, hastily mopping a bead of sweat from falling into his eyes. Dumbledore's eyes twinkled wildly and he nodded. Harry was gladdened to note a few paintings muttered their agreement with the teenager's plan, earning scowls from their neighbors.

"Very organized, Harry." The boy nodded, his thoughts elsewhere. Glancing at the clock, the headmaster sat up in his chair and beamed at the boy. "I trust you and your assistants will be able to come up with finalized decisions?" Harry nodded in promise lifting his heavy bag to his shoulder once more. "I will have the heads of houses put up announcements in the common rooms, Mr. Potter. When would you like the first meeting?" Harry drooped at the query. It had to be an accessible date for everyone.

"Er...how about...Wednesday for the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, and Thursday for the Ravenclaws and Slytherins?" it sounded odd to have Slytherins in the Defense Association, but Harry knew he had to be impartial to anyone if he was still the leader of the society. The headmaster inclined his head slightly, absently stroking his long white beard. Fawkes shrilled a lazy sound and hid his face under his wing.

"Eight o'clock in the great hall?" he proffered.

"And old members of all houses meet at six in the usual place." Both males agreed, and Harry stood to go. As he reached the door to turn

the knob, the Gryffindor halted, and turned to face the curious face of his headmaster. "Thank you, Professor Dumbledore." The old man's eyes sparkled in slight amusement before he bobbed his head.

"And thank you, Mr. Potter." Harry smiled and exited the overly warm office, nearly skipping down the chilled stairwell. The DA was finally back on, and had gone public. The school year was looking up.

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Friday evening, Harry and Ron walked out to the Quidditch Pitch shouldering their brooms. They had informed the team the day prior to today's practice, and proceeded to plan out what the agenda held today. They wore their usual robes, since today wasn't a formal practice, and they weren't to spend much time out on the pitch tonight. Madam Hooch had promised to leave the crate of gear out on the pitch for them, and gave Harry the key to the broom shed to return it.

Not many knew that both boys were co-captains, save the members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Hermione, and the Smythe boys. Harry was glad Malfoy hadn't loaded the ammunition to shoot out taunts at him, for getting yet another prestigious recognition. Besides, the Gryffindor was only fully captaining the Slytherin and Ravenclaw matches, one of which was next month, and the other, sometime next year. They would play Hufflepuff in December, right before the break.

"The game after ours is Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff, right?" Ron asked a few seconds later. Harry nodded in affirmation.

"Then Slytherin versus Ravenclaw, and us versus Hufflepuff. Slytherin plays Hufflepuff in February, and we have a go at Ravenclaw in March. And when we make the final, we'll be playing whoever's left over." He explained.

"Did Kaltag say anything about Sliatyckx matches?" the red head asked as they turned into the entrance hall. Harry shook his head negative.

"McGonagall hasn't said anything either. I don't think they will be playing." Both young men wilted at the thought, but kept their hopes up as they inhaled the fresh, early evening air. The sun hung limply between the mountains in the west, cascading the sky with deep tangerines, mustards, and rosy pinks. Trotting to the pitch, the best friends continued to talk on various topics within sports, including the possibility of another Quidditch Cup, this time in Brazil.

"Seamus told me the Tutshill Tornadoes are facing Ireland this year," Ron revealed. "I don't think that's true."

"I thought it was the Tarapoto Tree-Skimmers and the Fitchburg Finches." Harry divulged, creasing his dark eyebrows. "Or the Vrastra Vultures and the Tree-Skimmers." Ron's ear tips glowed bright red at the mention of Viktor Krum's team. Harry gripped his broom tighter, waiting for Ron to chew the famous seeker out. He still had it in for the man since he took Hermione to the Yule Ball in their fourth year.

"Thought Krum got traded to the Goblins in Poland," he spoke through slightly clenched teeth. "Not far enough, if you ask me."

"He has been lying low since the tournament," Harry told his best friend. "Haven't really heard much about him." Ron took on a satisfied expression.

"The less, the better." He replied smugly. "I hope Hermione still isn't writing to that git." The crimson of his ears spread evenly over his cheeks and he balled his hands into fists. "She was writing to him all last year, remember?"

"I remember."

"Her expression every time she received a response!"

"Quite excited, she was..."

"And how she'd write those lengthy replies to Icky Vicky!" his face burned. Harry mused he could feel the boy giving off heat from his position.

"Pages and pages; they were books, in fact..."

"What does she see in him, anyway?" an annoyed tone curved in the keeper's voice.

"What, indeed, Ronald...." The two had finally reached the large field, Ron dragging his Cleansweep resentfully, and Harry finding the trunk of equipment. They only needed the quaffle, snitch, bat and bludger tonight. Nothing for a long amount of time. "Ron, can you levitate the crate to the center of the field?" Ron, preoccupied with his own thoughts of destroying a certain Bulgarian seeker, nodded and whipped out his wand. Harry looked over the vast lawn and out at the stands. They were completely empty this evening, and quiet. He heard a loud bang from behind him and turned to see Ron's falsely sheepish grin, and the trunk of equipment sprawled in the bleachers. The Gryffindor seeker heard the other teenager restate the levitation charm, efficiently raising the crate again.

"Sorry about that," he apologized. "Wasn't paying attention." Harry motioned for him to continue to the center of the pitch, as he looked down at his Firebolt. It had been some time since he had flown the broom. As if urging him with its shine under the waning sunlight, the broom summoned him for a long awaited ride. Harry flung one leg over the slender piece of wood and kicked off the ground hard, shooting swiftly in the air.

The sultry September air sliced through his short, raven tresses, and beat into his skin. The feel of the broom within his grasp, the air passing through his robes, his icy clothes clinging to his body...he had missed this. The teenager rose higher and higher in the air, making a few practice loops on his broom, before he sharply pointed the expensive Firebolt back toward the pitch. Hearing the dull roar of the wind streaking past his ears, and feeling the iciness of the air, Harry could almost see the lush green of the lawn in his sight. Just before he crashed into the ground, the skilled seeker fainted, executing a perfect Wronski Feint, and gliding back into the air.

As he surveyed the pitch below him, Harry circled overhead to see many dots entering the pitch, some black, others a pale blue. With a gentle tip of the handle toward the ground, the Firebolt automatically flew down to greet the others, as if it knew Harry's very thoughts. Upon closer inspection, Harry grinned at Ginny, Andrew Kirke, Kaltag, Starbuck, Yorick, Icarus and Thanos, along with three of Yorick's younger second year sisters. When he touched down, Ron had opened the trunk and tossed the quaffle to Ginny and a bat to

Kirke. The jumping bludgers shook the rickety box, anxious to whiz into the air to wreak havoc.

"Looking good, Harry." Yorick commented.

"Let's sit in the stands, everyone." Starbuck didn't wait for them to listen, and headed to the nearest bleacher. The other seven followed, leaving the four Gryffindors on the ground. Harry held his Firebolt in his hand and started as the torches around the pitch lit to light up the grounds. They had always done so when a team had a practice. Ginny tucked the quaffle under her arm, and held up her own Cleansweep, given to her by her brothers for her birthday. Kirke was taking a few practice swings with his bat, as Ron knelt beside the coffer to release one of the jumping bludgers. They strained against their belts, grumbling in an odd language only they understood.

"Now then," he started. "Welcome back, Andrew and Ginny. As you can see, we've much to do, replacing Jack and two chasers. After much deliberation, we've also decided to pick reserves for our positions, since some of us will be leaving soon." Ginny and Kirke nodded in understanding, toying with their Quidditch equipment.

"When are we having tryouts?" Kirke, the fifth year asked, studying his bat a bit closer.

"Sometime next week. McGonagall hasn't exactly scheduled it yet." Harry answered. "I expect Saturday or Sunday." Both fifth years nodded, and Harry glanced at the quietly chattering group in the stands.

"So what are we doing tonight?" Ginny queried, twirling the quaffle with one hand. Harry vigorously rubbed a dull spot to a shine on his Firebolt with a piece of his robe.

"Just a few warm up shots, whacks, and catches between us. Nothing heavy as of yet. Ready?" he turned to the enthused Kirke. With a firm incline of his head, Ron released the bludger and the snitch, which Harry had just noticed was struggling in his grasp. Following it quickly, Kirke mounted his broom and took off after the offending metal ball, knocking it several times with his bat. Ginny took to the air with the quaffle, trailed by Ron and Harry who

mounted their Cleansweep and Firebolt. As Ron defended the giant hoops at the end of the field, Harry chased after the snitch.

The golden ball zipped in and out of sight, barely keeping Harry on his toes, but the trained seeker enjoyed the thrill of the chase. Taking his eyes off the prize, Harry watched as Kirke defended Ginny expertly from the bludger; as he recalled last year, Katie Bell had said neither of the new beaters were brilliant. It seemed that Kirke had practiced over the summer. Ron made many threatening figure eights before the three hoops, which would intimidate any chaser. Ginny, however, was another story.

The once replacement seeker zoomed around on her broom trying to fake Ron out, and lobbed the ball at her brother. Harry could definitely tell Ron was telling the truth about his skill at the hoops; he caught Ginny's quaffle and threw it back at her. Kirke was also doing a fantastic job protecting the outstanding chaser. If he had more like them, the Gryffindor Quidditch team would be impossible to beat.

A glint of gold whizzed past the talented seeker, and Harry shot after it. It darted around as a diversionary tactic; its erratic motions no match for the brilliant Firebolt beneath the Boy-Who-Lived. Stretching his hand out far, his fingertips hardly grazing the fluttering wings of the snitch, Harry closed his hand over the grappling ball, shooting around to the others on the far end of the pitch. Light applause barely caught his ears as the Gryffindor reddened and touched down on land with his teammates. Kirke was fighting with the mean-spirited bludger, barely able to keep it between his fingertips.

"Brilliant!" Icarus called from the stands. "Brilliant air work, mates!" Harry noted Ginny, Ron and Kirke had all worked up quite a sweat from their informal training, and he was somewhat dry. The sun had entirely fallen behind the far mountains, making the lit torches burn brighter on the pitch. Dinner was sure to take place in a few minutes, so Harry told the others he'd let them know when the tryouts would be. Kirke and Ginny walked back up to the castle with everyone in the stands, save Kaltagonus, leaving the three captains to wrestle the bludger back into the crate. Putting the quaffle and snitch in their rightful places, Kaltag offered to levitate the trunk back to the broom shed, while Harry and Ron carried their brooms. The seeker's mind weighed heavily on the past day, with classes, Quidditch and



Dumbledore...he couldn't bear to ponder the amount of homework he had this weekend.

"Oy, Harry," Ron spoke, his voice slightly breathless. "Forgot to ask you, what did Dumbledore want today?" Harry pulled a few loose strands of hair from his forehead and flicked them toward the ground.

"He's approved the DA," he revealed. "He wants to keep it." Ron's expression brightened, and he clung to his Cleansweep Seven tighter.

"That's good, mate."

"So when are you letting new members join?" Kaltag asked, rushing ahead to the broom storage, Harry opening the door with a set of magical keys.

"We'll have to discuss that tomorrow. I need to consult you and your siblings' help, also." Kaltag set the dark crate down and ended the spell, tucking his wand back in the fold of his robes. Closing and sealing the door, Harry looked between the two boys. "In the Room of Requirement. After breakfast tomorrow." The three didn't speak more about the subject as they continued up the small slant of hill toward the glittering lights in the castle.

...

Breakfast at Hogwarts was seemingly empty, as it was the first weekend after the first week of school. Many students chose to remain buried under their pillows and blankets, set on sleeping in this morning. The Gryffindor and Paraffin table scarcely had anyone, with the exception of a few first, fifth and sixth years, and an occasional seventh year. Fatigued eyes met in acknowledgement and nothing more, allowing the students a morning's peace. Professors sat at the head table, wide-eyed and merry (or as merry as Snape and McGonagall's stern looks could extend), much to the irritation of the students. The only instructor that seemed to take a leaf out of the students' book was, of course, Professor Armistead Jace. And he was missing.

Harry rubbed at his still bleary eyes and chewed tiredly on his flapjacks. It wasn't very early in the morning, nor was it very late. It was around the time the post usually arrived, so more students

would undoubtedly be joining them, making the hall raucous once more. Even Ron appeared drowsy today, and he was never at the edge of unconsciousness at any meal. Hermione, of course, was as spry and upbeat as always, babbling to a near lively Nikola about her homework load. Starbuck watched the doors of the hall carefully as many entered and sat to eat breakfast, but he did it more out of boredom than real interest. Kaltag twirled his sausage in his scrambled eggs before popping it in his mouth and chewing slowly.

"Why are we up this early again?" Ron asked, for what was probably the third time that morning. Hermione huffed and speared a sausage in annoyance.

"We're going to the Room of Requirement, Ronald. To discuss the Defense Association. Stop asking, you already know the answer." She hissed. The Weasley boy merely smirked slothfully, which didn't quite reach his brown eyes.

"Don't answer; you already know what the question is." He countered, munching with more verve. With a wide yawn, the redhead rubbed his eyes and leaned on his palm. "Why did we have to get up this early? We could've gone later." More Paradors took a seat at the table, and the noise level in the hall turned up considerably.

"The afternoon is dedicated to homework, Ronald." Hermione sighed in impatience. "Which I doubt you'd do, anyway."

"Oh, leave it out," a frustrated Ginny grumbled to the arguing friends, plopping in a seat next to Harry. "Always arguing! Shut it, already." Both Gryffindor prefects reddened and returned to their breakfasts. Harry pondered keeping Ginny around more often to end his best friends' rows. Just as the double doors opened to admit the Malfoy/Xenik clique, or 'Manik' as Nikola dubbed them, hundreds of owls flapped through the open windows of the great hall, dropping missives and packages to their owners. Among the various colors of wings was Hermes, the messenger of the Celestials, and Icarus' father, also delivering things for Celestial students and professors.

Pig twittered madly around Ron and Ginny, doing impressive form eights and loops around their red heads. With a joint effort, both Weasleys plucked the tiny owl from the air and pulled off the large rolled newspaper. A handsome barn owl delivered a newspaper also

to Hermione, and she handed him a Knut in his talon sack, and a few strips of bacon. Chomping on more eggs, Harry watched as Kaltag and Starbuck equally read over the front page of the Olympic Herald, their brows furrowing at the headlines. Taking a quick sip from his chalice of milk, Harry wiped his white mustache with his jersey sleeve and looked over the assorted tables of Hogwarts. Voices, mostly female, blared louder as the hall was now full of the student populace, no doubt reading their mail and other articles in the Daily Prophet.

Harry hadn't had the wizarding newspaper delivered to him anymore, since he could always nick Hermione's paper when she left them out. Nothing worthwhile was happening, bar the low, sporadic Death Eater activity, but since Harry received a front-row seat in the inner workings of the Dark Lord's group, there was no reason to get the paper anymore. Besides, if there were any mind-blowing events or occurrences, Hogwarts' grapevine would without hesitation spread it like wildfire in half an hour. A desperately stifled snicker was heard down the table, gaining Harry's attention. The Death Eaters couldn't have done something amusing. A huff of fury and irritation was heard on the other side of Nikola, and the Gryffindor gazed upward to find Hermione's brown eyes glued to the front page of the Prophet. She seemed to exude a tense anger that warded all people off. Even Nikola scooted a bit farther from her.

"What?" Harry inquired. A subdued snort made its way to his sharp hearing and Harry knew he could place that snort anywhere.

Ron.

The Gryffindor prefect's façade was clearly amused, and he shook his head, shooting furtive glances at his prefect partner.

"Did he write and tell you that, Hermione?" he teased. "Surely, you can't be shocked by this news." The witch only sent the Weasley male a solid, glare of sharp daggers before her eyes raced over the words. Many girls around him gave disappointed huffs and cries, including histrionic Lavender and Parvati.

"What's going on?" he asked his only Gryffindor chaser. Ginny raised an eyebrow at the sixth year, and snatched the paper directly from under Ron's nose.

"No, I was not reading that." he spoke mockingly. Ginny overlooked her brother's exclamation and placed the paper in Harry's hands, returning to wallow tiredly in her breakfast. As his emerald eyes skimmed over the bold, black headline, Harry felt slight sympathy for his bushy-haired, bossy friend.

VIKTOR KRUM IN A FAMILY WAY!

...

"I don't think he knew what he was getting into," Kaltag stated, reading over the article in a comfy, round-backed, yellow armchair. "Neither did this Ulrike Radoslav." His azure eyes were deadlocked on the Daily Prophet article before him, reading and rereading the article by columnist Hans Dukakis. Hermione appeared indifferent and impassive to the Being's comment, scribbling furiously on her parchment. Ron set his brown eyes on her, watching her every move, his narrowed eyes waiting. After a few more minutes of his stalking, Hermione glowered at the boy.

"What?" she hissed. Ron steadied his staring and let his eyebrows lose themselves in his fringe.

"Go ahead." She lifted a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "I know you want to do it." Hermione forced her eyes into slits.

"Do what?" Ron looked at her incredulously.

"Go crazy. Scream. You're peeved Krum did this." Hermione rolled her large, astute eyes.

"Oh, honestly, Ron. It wasn't like he and I were going steady." She confessed. "We were pen pals. Since we met we've only been friends." It was Ron's turn to narrow his eyes.

"Friends send each other love letters?" he retorted. Hermione contorted her face with an ill expression.

"We sent each other normal, standard, letters, Ronald." She divulged. "And why are we discussing this? I've no obligation to justify myself to you." Ron colored at her cool comment, finding no fault in it.

"Vicky's a father now. What are you, Baby Krum's godmother?"

"Can we please get back to what we were doing?" Harry interrupted. It was times like these he needed Ginny to shut both the sixth year prefects up, and keep them silent. Ron scrunched his face in subdued annoyance, whilst Hermione resumed her scratching on parchment. Nikola and Starbuck were walking around the Room of Requirement, admiring the comfy armchairs and warm fire. There was a board table behind the couches and chairs, in case the six wanted to use a hard surface for their meeting. Starbuck plopped between Nikola and Hermione on the blue couch, giving Harry an awed look.

"I don't see why you don't come here often," he spoke, settling on the sofa. "It's perfect if you want to get away."

"And how do you hold meetings in here? Doesn't look like its enough room for everyone." Nikola added.

"The Room of Requirement never looks the same, unless you need the same room. It gives you what you require." Harry lectured. "I thought of a comfy place where we can sit and have a conversation. And this is what it came up with." Both Celestials nodded in impressiveness. "For Defense meetings, it's large an has loads of books and cushions for every single person." Ron had chewed on a few of the biscuits the room provided for the six.

"On to business," Hermione announced. "What did you need us here for, Harry?" The Gryffindor sighed, and settled in a seat facing away from the hearth, and toward the others in the room.

"Well, I was called to Dumbledore's office yesterday, and he approved the DA. We started talking about how we can cater to everyone's needs, and how we'd be more effective if we weren't teaching everyone basic first year spells." Hermione and Kaltag nodded in agreement, while Ron stuffed another biscuit into his mouth. "The headmaster and I have come up with a Defense Association split into three groups: Novice, Intermediate, and Elite.

"Novice will be for first and second years only, and Dumbledore's decided to let Kenward and Jace run it." Hermione shifted slightly and gave Harry a concerned look.

"Are you sure you want them to teach the first and second years?" she sought to confirm. He nodded firmly.

"Definitely. With only two groups, I think it will work better."

"I agree," Kaltag spoke up, grabbing a sheet of parchment and a quill. "Lightens your load."

"Precisely. The Intermediates will probably be run by me or you, Hermione." The prefect looked flattered at the offer. "And the Elite will be the older years, and those who are efficient duelers." Ron cocked his head to the side.

"How do we know for sure?" At this, Harry heaved a great breath. He had thought about it, and came up with a decision.

"I've decided to make the higher two groups available by audition only." He disclosed to the other five. Ron folded his arm across his chest.

"Audition? You mean, like, spells?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "We give them standard spells—"

"The Disarming Spell, the Impediment Jinx," Hermione listed. "And others." The Gryffindor male nodded.

"Give them standard spells. The first two will be Intermediary spells, and the last two, advanced. If they do well on their attempts of the last two, then they'll be placed in the Elite. If not, they're down to the second level." Harry clarified, seizing a sheet of parchment and a quill. "All right, spells for both?" He poised his quill over the parchment to copy down their suggestions.

"The Severing Spell," Hermione offered. Harry jotted it down quickly. "And the Impediment Jinx, Disarming Spell."

"Stunning Spell," Harry murmured. "Immobile Charm..." They were all standard spells for third and fourth years. At least some of the current DA members should perform them.

"Throw in the Patronus Charm as extra, Harry," Ron suggested. "If they can at least produce a wisp of smoke, they would be in the advanced class." Harry pointed his quill at Ron.

"Great idea." He praised. Kaltag tapped his quill against his own parchment, thinking silently to himself.

"How many spells are you planning to give them?" he asked.

"Four," the green-eyed boy answered quickly. "And the Patronus as a bonus. I can't give them the exact same spells. I have to mix them up a bit." Kaltag nodded in thought, continuing his task of tapping the parchment.

"Full-Body Bind, mate," Ron spoke. "And the Summoning Charm."

"That's a definite," Hermione added. "Why didn't I think about that?" Ron rolled his eyes and bit his tongue to keep from retorting.

"Reductor Curse?" Starbuck offered? Harry grinned.

"That's a helpful one, that is." He hadn't told any of his Celestial friends about the Department of Mysteries, so it made sense they all looked at him in confusion.

"And how about the Shield Charm?" Nikola recommended. "We can send a harmless spell at them, and see how it holds up against their shield." Kaltag released a light chortle.

"More fun for us." He enlightened.

"First and second years don't have to test, right?" Nikola queried.

"Nope," Harry replied. "They're automatically in the Novice level."

"This'll be a good year," Ron grinned, scratching his quill on the yellowed paper. "Slytherins'll be fuming." Harry stopped writing abruptly and raised his emerald eyes to view Ron. He had completely forgotten.

"Galleon calls again, Harry? I mean, I know we're official, and all, but I want to know if I need to make new...Harry?" Hermione questioned.

"What's wrong?" Every eye landed on the Gryffindor, still looking at Ron. The only Weasley present lowered his red brows.

"What?" Harry mussed his hair into a tangle before exhaling seriously.

"Dumbledore is putting up announcements in every common room," the raven-haired boy began. "So we may have Slytherins in the Defense Association." Ron sputtered and stood up, knocking the parchment and quill out of his lap.

"IS HE MAD?" he shouted. Hermione glared at the prefect. "D'YOU REALIZE MALFOY AND HIS EVIL GOONS COULD JOIN? DO YOU WANT THAT KIND OF TROUBLE?"

"Sit down and shut your mouth, Ronald!" Hermione hissed. Ron gave Hermione a dark look but returned his flinch-worthy glare on Harry.

"Look, Ron," he initiated calmly. "You've got to understand, Dumbledore won't be happy if we just refuse Slytherins. If we do, there will be no more DA."

"Harry's right, Ron." Nikola supported.

"Ron, not all Slytherins are bound to be Death Eaters," Hermione elucidated in a gentle tone. Ron masked his face in disbelief. "There are some who probably don't want to be, as much as we refuse to believe. But the fact is, not all Slytherins are evil." Ron fell into his chair ungracefully, tightly interlocking his arms.

"But what if they join to spy?" he advocated. Harry's eyebrows ducked into his messy hairline. He hadn't really considered that. "Then You-Know-Who would know everything. We can't have that now, can we?"

"It's a risk we must take," Harry argued, glancing at Starbuck. Squinting his orbs, he faced the Being. "You can read minds, right?" The boy was confused at the swift change of topic. Ron's face switched from one of anger to one of shock.

"Only if—"



"The thoughts pose a danger to the school or an individual," Harry ended with a smirk. Starbuck's face twitched in realization, while his brother folded his leaned against one arm of the chair.

"So if a Slytherin is a spy, then you'd hear his or her thoughts." Kaltag smirked. "Good thinking, Harry." Ron raised his eyebrow, and looked between Harry and Starbuck.

"When were you planning on telling me you could read minds?" he asked. Starbuck shrugged smugly.

"When you decide to murder someone one day." Ron nodded.

"Seems fair."

"Mm."

"All right, I've got the spells down for both levels, and we'll sort them out later. Let's adjourn to the table to get our member lists situated." Harry ordered. Everyone reluctantly stood from their cozy seats and budged to the dark cherry table behind the sofa. Harry snorted when Ron grabbed the plate of biscuits and followed the others, taking his seat between Harry and Kaltag. Once all were seated and their parchments ready, Harry commenced. He had asked Starbuck, Nikola, and Kaltag the previous night to list any of the Celestials they think would be interested in the Association, since he didn't know many that well. "All right, Nikola, we'll start with the females. Voltaire?" Nikola stacked a few parchments underneath one, and cleared her throat.

"We've got a good list of fifth, sixth and seventh years." She reported. "Tam Xu, top of Voltaire class, followed by the second, Isabella Lancaster. We've got Yorick's older sister, Amara, Endymion's younger sister, Selene Magnus, Basil's younger sister, Ioannes, and...Olivia Kane, Melia Iorgos, Elia Fairfax and Etienne Flannery. They're about Intermediate or Elite level." Harry nodded, scribbling some notes down.

"Paraffins?"

"Hardly any work there," she tittered. "All the sixth year girls; Kiden Kaenslar, Tess Kaenslar, Raelin Maddox, Elise Flannery, Genevieve Talbot, and the second and first years can decide for themselves."

The Gryffindor organizer scratched his head and motioned for her to go on.

"Brittlebore?" Starbuck took over.

"Delia Xantho, Canace Laertes, Elsa Flannery...." And she went on to list many others, and had none to suggest for Aves. Harry's eyes goggled. The list was getting pretty lengthy. He wondered how he'd find the strength to teach such a large number.

"All right, Voltaire males," Kaltag began. "Jason Quon, Guan-yin Cheng, Aleron Layland, Cadmus Anatole...." Kaltag continued to name Voltaires.

"Right, then, Brittlebores?" a droopy-eyed Ron directed to Starbuck, who sighed and ruffled his wavy, blonde hair. The prefect seized another biscuit and chewed it while the Being began.

"Ulan Layland, Giovanni Murdock, Stavros Niendar, Proteus Naiad, Prashin Singh, Chad Stephens," the Being paused to cover his mouth and yawn before continuing. "Sorry; Fletcher Gresham...." Harry himself had trouble keeping his eyes open, and it was still morning. This tedious meeting was almost over.

"Paraffins," a bright-eyed Hermione conducted. "Who've you got?"

"All of the sixth years," Kaltag took over, "Arthur Gilliam, Orion Lucas, Simon Mitte...." The Celestial called out a few more names before he finished. "That's it." Ron had long since fell into a gentle nap before he lifted his head from his arms.

"Can we go now?" he griped, brushing crumbs off of his vermilion cheek. Hermione raised her eyebrow at the boy.

"You'd rather do homework now then continue discussing the DA?" she questioned crossly. Ron's eyes enlarged and he sat up completely.

"Can't have that, now can we?" Ron chuckled nervously, his rosy face giving away his true feelings. Kaltag shot Harry an amused look. He leaned close to Harry's ear, cautiously glancing at Ron.

"I'm sure Vicky wouldn't mind." Harry cleared his throat audibly to cover the guffaw ready to burst from his throat.

...

Wednesday finally dawned on Hogwarts School, much to the anxiety of Harry Potter. He paced in the Room of Requirement, commonly known as Dumbledore's Army Base, by Ginny, nervously fluffing pillows and straightening the books on the shelf. Hermione occupied a feathery cushion and read from one of the books, while Ron sparred playfully with the magical dummy the room provided. Next to Hermione's foot was an entire basket full of fake Galleons and what appeared to be silver and gold bracelets.

Harry had come up with the idea of keeping the Galleons for the Elite members, but having bands and bracelets for the Intermediate and Novice members. Gold would be for Kenward and Jace's class, while silver would be for the second level students. It had taken some time and expert charm work, but Hermione pulled it off.

Across from Hermione sat Kaltag, nonchalantly turning a page in a borrowed tome, and once in a while occupying himself with his silver chain. Harry treaded the familiar pacing path he had committed to memory on the floor, glancing at the clock every few moments. It was ten minutes to six. The members of last year's Defense Association should be piling in about now. Ron cried a fake karate yell and jabbed the tan dummy in the face, where the jaw would have been.

"Maybe we should teach physical combat," he suggested, elbowing the mannequin in its stuffy abdomen. "It may come in handy." Kaltag chortled.

"Right. I can just imagine Harry sucker-punching Voldemort in his jaw," he countered. "I'd pay to see it, actually...." Ron frowned at Kaltag.

"What's wrong with it? Don't they teach you physical combat in Aripedes?" he asked, halting momentarily to snap his fingers in thought. Ron stamped his foot hard and exclaimed, "Aha! In Chiron's class, right?" Kaltag nodded, idly turning an antiqued page.

"Mental, physical, and weaponry." He murmured distractedly. Ron grinned triumphantly.

"See? Why can't we?" he carried on with slapping the model around, twisting its legs and choking it.

"Because wizards and witches haven't trained since their first year," Nikola answered, entering the room with Starbuck and Ginny. "As Celestial students have." Ginny took the closest bolster toward Harry, watching the DA leader pace in hilarity. Ron scowled at the dummy and punched it sorely out of resentment.

"That's not fair." He grouched, kicking the mannequin. Harry stopped to watch his best friend with interest. Turning to Ginny, who had a wide smirk on her face, he tilted his head a bit.

"Is he always this easily amused?" he asked the female Weasley. She raised an eyebrow.

"Have you met our father, Harry?" she rejoined. Harry grinned and stopped his pacing to sit beside Ginny. Starbuck was jadedly levitating pillows with his forces and rearranging them; while Nikola took one of the iron fire-pokers in her hand and bent it clear in a parabolic shape. Harry had never seen firsthand what her powers were, but he was impressed. Beings and wizards just had to be intimidated by her. He was distracted when the door opened to admit Neville, Dean and Seamus, followed by Parvati and Lavender. Padma Patil entered with Terry Boot and Anthony Goldstein.

Luna dreamily drifted in, taking a seat by Neville, her large eyes scanning the room, settling on Ron wrestling with the mannequin. The Gryffindor keeper had the figurine in a headlock, pounding its face.

"Be careful, Ronald," her wistful voice warned. "Cotton-Dwelling Doxies could be in there, waiting to bite your knuckles." Hermione emitted a loud, contradictory huff from her cushion, shaking her head slightly behind her book. Luna either ignored or did not catch it. Ginny excused herself and went to sit with Neville and Luna, leaving Harry to stand and watch the door.

More students spilled into the DA area, including Justin, Ernie, Hannah and Susan from Hufflepuff. Harry was pleased to observe

several glowers directed at Zacharias Smith as he entered by himself, perplexed at why the students were still wishing harm on him. Ron even began to punch the test mannequin harder, his face smoldering a deep crimson, contending his hair. After a few Ravenclaws entered, Harry raised an eyebrow when Cho and Michael walked in, hand in hand.

The striking Asian Ravenclaw avoided making contact with Harry's emerald eyes as she walked in the room. Michael also looked away from Ginny. But had the two actually found the courage to glance at their former acquaintances, they would not have found any fiery hurt; just coolness and lack of concern. Though bravery was not one of Ravenclaw's house principals. Harry shook his head at the two and sighed. So it was Cho's last year here.

Thank goodness.

Harry was just thrilled to not have to drown in the river of tears that was Cho Chang, and he inwardly wished Michael the best of luck. With N.E.W.T.s and her emotions running high, the boy would be better off permanently wearing a raincoat. Six o'clock rolled around, and Harry was signaled of such when both Hermione and Kaltag snapped their books shut, and turned to face the boy. Ron abandoned the model to plop beside Hermione's cushion, his face looking worn and beat. Perhaps the dummy exacted more damage than he did. Tidying his robes and folding his hands in front of him, Harry flashed an anxious grin at his 'students.'

"Welcome back to the Defense Association." He greeted. "I hope you all had a productive summer, and remembered what was taught from last year." He turned to Kaltag and Star and Nikola in the back, coughing slightly. "Er, for those of you who don't know, the DA has been sanctioned by the headmaster, and we are an official organization." Many cheers and applause met this announcement, and Harry blinked away the bright spots before his eyes when a bright white flash from Colin Creevey's camera snapped a picture from his right. "This means we're going to have new recruits joining us soon, but first, we must discuss this year's procedure.

"Regardless of whether you're a member or not, we will have trials for everyone, because we have now instituted a three-level organization structure." The room buzzed with low murmurs as students turned to talk with their friends about the new rule.

"Why've we got to try out?" Zacharias' grating voice called from the back. Every eye turned to glower at the Hufflepuff. Harry bridled a bit.

"Because we need know your level of skill," Kaltag answered. "Though some of you may think you're hotshots and can handle it, you may not. There's nothing to be ashamed of. We're all going through the exams." Zacharias looked peeved at the Being, but kept his mouth securely shut. Harry beamed gratefully at the Celestial.

"Thank you, Kaltag. Now, the three levels are Novice, Intermediate, and Elite." He described. "Right now, you're all on the Intermediate Level. First and second years are all on the Novice level, in spite of skill. You all will perform certain spells we ask you to, and whatever spells you achieve correctly, that's where you'll be sorted. Any questions?" No one raised their hands, and many murmurs of "No" were heard.

"You'll test with this mannequin here," he gestured to the awkward standing figure, "and you'll be placed in a group." Harry's eyes scanned the crowd for any bewildered faces, and he unfortunately happened upon Cho and Michael cuddling on a pillow in the back. Resisting the strong impulse to roll his eyes, Harry went on. "This year, we're focusing on the students with N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s," his eyes lingered on Ginny's darkening face, "to get you all to pass with high scores. I'm not here to replace Professor Kenward; he seems to be a brilliant teacher, and he'll teach you the main Defense routes. We're practicing; in case something happens at this school we need to be ready to fight." Many faces turned grave and eyes dulled as they locked onto Harry's green orbs.

"The meeting in the great hall isn't really for you all. It basically repeats what I am saying tonight, save a few things." Harry turned to Hermione and Ron to see if he had forgotten anything. The intelligent witch nudged the basket at her side with her knee and gave the boy a scolding look. "Right. Also, turn in your Galleons when you come up later to test. I know you're probably all a bit rusty, so tonight we're going to review the Disarming Spell before starting." Zacharias groaned aloud, and received a heavy pillow to the face by an annoyed Ginny. The Gryffindor chaser's eyes twinkled madly with mirth and she blushed under Harry's scrutiny. Smiling widely, Harry couldn't help but notice the satisfied grins adorning various

members' faces at Zacharias' expense. "Partner up, and disarm each other only. I'll let you know when the tests will begin."

A din of noise began as several members found a cohort and soon jets of red light tinted the room in cherry. A few members, like Hannah and Zacharias, were very rusty on the spell, but managed it after a few tries. Harry was especially proud Neville successfully disarmed Seamus on his first try, his new wand working out perfectly.

Cho and Michael, of course, paired up, Michael successfully disarming Cho, but the girl ineffectively produced enough power in the spell. Harry had walked around the room to watch groups and correct some shoddy wand work, until he navigated toward Hermione, Ron and Kaltag. The Being effectively disarmed both prefects at the same time, their wands falling gracefully into his hands.

"Best three out of three?" he quirked an eyebrow and asked, tossing their wands back to them. Ron muttered something to the Being, rubbing his arm and looking at Hermione. The witch was eyeing the Paraffin prefect suspiciously, her brown eyes searching his crystal blue ones.

"How'd you manage that?" she questioned. Kaltag shrugged. Harry walked over to the others and joined them. The Disarming Spell usually disarmed one victim at a time, never two, as he could not recall a time that ever happened. The Paraffin raised his eyebrows and lifted his wand.

"Expelliarmus!" he spoke, scarcely shouting. Harry felt his wand leave his grip and watched as it sailed into the boy's outstretched hand. Ron and Hermione's wands were with his, as well. Beaming at the others, Kaltag handed their wands back to their individual owners. "Best four out of four?"

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A/N: Revised chapter.

## Chapter Eleven Clues

1). We'll find out who made what DA classes and the new members in the official first meeting of the DA Elite.

2). It's not easy being green....

3). Quidditch trials, and we hear from Sirius.

Keep those reviews coming, and I'll do my absolute best to keep the chapters rolling!



## Chapter Eleven: Not Easy Being Green

"...So what's the total number of Elite members we have?" Harry tiredly queried his best friends. He lay sprawled on a cherry armchair in the Room of Requirement, his legs hanging numbly off the back of the chair. He had been in for two long, long nights when he held the trials. He had never seen so many spells performed in such a short span of time. Turning to eye the mannequin sympathetically, Harry frowned at the pitiful heap of cloth and padding.

The test dummy was charred; clinging to its nonexistent life literally by threads, smoke still issuing from the burnt doll. If Harry cocked his head to the side and squinted his green eyes a bit, he could still make out the name burned into the smoldering chest.

Zacharias.

When it was new DA Elite member Ginny's turn to perform a Flagration Spell on Wednesday night, she singed the Hufflepuff's name into the unfortunate figure without regret. Of course, when it was Zacharias' turn, he had frozen at the sight of the dummy in his namesake and was asked to stand aside by Hermione for holding up the impending practical examinations. Ron, Harry and Kaltag got a great laugh at his expense.

Harry thought back to those nights' best wand wielders, the Celestials surprisingly among the best. Hermione had tough competition between Kaltag and top Voltaire, Tam Xu, all of which passing all five of their required spells with flawlessness. It was a mass of confusion for Harry, at how the Celestials even knew such spells, since they previously hadn't any wands to put them to good use with. Starbuck had explained to him that Professor Thetis' class, Early Wizarding Education, was basically Charms without the wands. The Gryffindor was impressed with the fact that Tam and Kaltag could both make Patronuses, Kaltag's winged horse stronger and more solid than the Asian Entity's. Though Tam's had form (a giant panda), it was fuzzier than it should have been. Nevertheless, the two, and naturally Hermione, had made the Elite class.

Ron also was in the level one class; his only difficulty was his Patronus, as it only came out as a strong wisp of smoke. To the astonishment of everyone, Neville made the Elite class, surprising

even himself. It had been a productive, albeit strenuous two days. Curfew was fast approaching.

"Thirty-seven in Novice, forty-seven in Intermediate, and forty-three in Elite." Hermione summarized. "Didn't think we'd have that much." Ron agreed, stretching and yawning.

"We've even got Aves and Slytherins in Elite. Good night!" he exclaimed in disbelief, flopping into the couch like a heavy sack of grain. Harry scored his stomach sluggishly, remembering Monday and Tuesday before the scheduled days how Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott cornered him on the way to dinner in an inconspicuous alcove and asked if they could join the DA. Harry had explained what they had to do and the two went on their way, light Slytherin smiles playing on their faces. A few Aves and Slytherins had also joined the Novice, Elite and Intermediary groups, including Erik Hansen's younger brother, Uisdean, and the elder Nott's younger sister, Elisabeth. Many of the Celestials placed bets on how Androcles Xenik would react when he found out his youngest sibling, Emily Xenik, a Voltaire, joined the Novices. Starbuck confirmed with Harry that he read no ill wishes in their thoughts, so it was clear for them to join.

Nikola agreed to run the Intermediary division with Hermione, Harry, and Starbuck, forfeiting her spot in the Elite group. Harry's heart gave a great leap when Circe Balthazar volunteered to help Kenward and Jace with the level three group Novices, while Harry agreed to look in on them from time to time. He was glad he was sitting down when she had come to him, her long, dark hair glinting in the torchlight, her forest green eyes pulsing with power, making his heart pound. She held the male attention in the room without even commanding it, earning several glares from all house females. Hermione primly sat beside Ron, blinking the sleep fogging her mind. In her hand, she clutched the parchments with the list of where each member belonged. Her brown eyes were currently scanning the Elite list, her brows furrowing as she read the names to herself.

"This Ella Burton," she began. "Quite odd, isn't she?" Ron shrugged, and Harry felt too tired to comment.

"You tell us," Ron spoke. "She's in your dormitory." Scratching his head and yawning, Ron leaned tiredly on the arm of the chair. The Gryffindor witch bit her lip and narrowed her eyes at the list.

"I wouldn't know," she stated after a few minutes. "I haven't had much contact with her since she was revealed." Hermione tucked her legs beneath her on the burgundy sofa. "No one knows about her. She hasn't really spoken to anyone. I just want to know where she came from." Ron limply nodded and stifled a yawn.

"She knew spells well enough to land her in the Elite." He commented. Harry shifted his head a bit higher and more stable, as he felt dizzy from the blood rushing to his temples.

What was probably the surprise of the night, was Ella Burton, the enigma of a Gryffindor, also came out on Wednesday, and tested into the DA Elite. The only thing throwing her off was her opaque Patronus, but she had gotten farther than a lot of older members. The redhead barely spoke to anyone, or interacted with those her own age, keeping the mystery around her inclusive and obscure. Hermione lowered her brown brows thoughtfully at the Weasley's declaration.

"Exactly, how could she have known those spells well enough?" she queried.

"Probably transferred from another school," Harry offered, righting himself on the chair, shaking off the pull of slumber. "Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, America...."

"She hasn't got any of those accents. Pure English," Hermione pieced. "Hasn't spoken much either."

"No one seems to have a problem with her, Hermione," Ron admitted. "Let's leave it at that." The witch seemed reluctant to drop the topic of conversation, but conceded. Ron sent a mischievous smirk at Harry, who narrowed his eyes. "I see Cho's made it into the Elite." Harry's eyes widened.

"Wasn't expecting that to happen." Hermione scoffed and reviewed the list again.

"With how terrible she did before the test, I'm surprised." Hermione spoke. "She must be peeved Michael didn't make the cut." The black-haired Gryffindor frowned. Michael missed the last two spells completely, and couldn't even conjure a wisp of smoke for his

Patronus. He was placed in the Intermediate class, with hopes he would progress quickly so he could make it into the higher level.

"Think Cho thinks you sabotaged his trials so you can separate them?" Ron suggested. Harry's green eyes widened as he looked at his best friend. He truly hadn't thought Cho would assume that. He hoped she didn't censure him for Michael's lack of skill. Hermione un-tucked her legs from under her and leaned forward.

"That's right! Oh, Harry, you don't think she'll take it out on you, do you?" she appeared very worried the Ravenclaw seeker would seek revenge on him. Harry ran his white hands through his hair and issued a rough sigh.

"It isn't my fault Corner couldn't do a proper Reductor Curse and Immobile Charm," he replied, standing up to stretch. "Maybe if he'd paid more attention last year. Besides, it isn't as if I'm going to rub it in. I'm hardly fond of either of them." Ron and Hermione followed suit as the Defense Association leader walked to the door.

"Maybe," Hermione responded vaguely, not entirely trustful of Cho and Michael. "But I'd keep both eyes on them to be safe." Harry and Ron both rolled their eyes skyward, heading out into the corridor. As Hermione shut the door behind them and polished her prefect badge with the fabric of her robe, the door to the Room of Requirement disappeared. Wandering down the hall to the next corridor, the trio fell into pensive silence, mulling over the last two days.

To Harry, the task of overseeing over one hundred and twenty students from both worlds was nerve wracking. He couldn't see how any of the defense professors could bear such a heavy burden. Being responsible for over one hundred futures was in no way alleviating his weary body. Having those lives, in his ashen, sweaty palms. Not comforting.

"We've got a Charms essay due, right?" Ron asked, visibly wiping the sleep from his brown eyes. "Monday?"

"Yes." Hermione answered. "I'm headed to the library to add some things to my revision tomorrow. But you two'll probably be busy with the schedule for tryouts on Saturday."

"Oh, right," Ron suddenly remembered with a subdued frown. "Did you get the nod from McGonagall, Harry?" At the Gryffindor's verification, the three continued their trek. McGonagall had gone to both boys and informed them she had booked the Quidditch pitch Saturday afternoon for team tryouts, at Harry's request. The bulletin had gone up Wednesday night after the scheduled exams, giving the Gryffindors a few days to prepare. Many Gryffindors displayed their excitement for trying out, with the exception of the sixth and seventh years. The N.E.W.T. testers collectively stated adding Quidditch practice to their already tight schedule would be risking over exhaustion, therefore, none would tryout.

"Brill," Ron answered buttoning his cloak. "And DA Elite Sunday, we've got that as well." Harry heaved the sigh specially crafted for the overburdened. Hermione pleated the parchments and placed them in the folds of her robes, glancing around the corridor.

"What've you got planned for our first meeting, Harry?" she questioned.

"D'you think we'll be studying the art of Animagi?" Ron popped out, enthusiasm written all over his rosy face. The intelligent witch alongside them huffed and scrunched her face in sarcasm.

"Oh, yes, Ron," she started mockingly. "Harry just wants to add more illegal proceedings to his already broad file now, doesn't he?" The young man in question considered the idea of touching upon Animagus forms with his classes, especially Elite. After all, his father had been one, and Sirius. Wasn't he always slated to follow in the footsteps of his father? Before he could answer, he caught a glint of white in the corner of his eye and turned to face the disturbance. The very last thing he needed on such a tiring night was him.

"Potter!" Malfoy's caustic voice spat, a light, barely noticeable spray of saliva shooting out from his enunciation. Harry was disappointed to note Androcles Xenik was also with him, his arms crossed and his hazel eyes hateful. Beside him, Ron and Hermione tensed, their hands instinctively hovering over their wands, but to Malfoy and Xenik, they appeared to be placing their hands jadedly on their hips. Malfoy's lips curled into a self-satisfied grin as he gave Harry a once over. "What's the Golden Hero doing out past curfew?" Xenik leered behind his cohort, constricting his grip on his arms. The Gryffindor male merely narrowed his eyes, fighting back a yawn.

"None of your business, Malfoy." He ground out, lacking the usual defiance in his voice. He was too tired to put up a fight with the Slytherin tonight. Fighting only made him more alert, and he did not want to be alert right now. He wanted to be asleep. Attentiveness was not a good thing when tired. Malfoy only narrowed his eyes and glared at Hermione and Ron.

"I see the King of Bins and his Mudblood queen are right beside their leader." He insulted. Ron's fist clenched over the robe where his wand was, but he made no move to strike Malfoy.

"Mind your mouth, snake." He hissed. Harry's green eyes were getting droopy. Draco raised a perfect, pale eyebrow at the redhead and smirked.

"Getting brave, are we? Learn that from your fearless leader, did you?" he taunted. If Harry weren't so tired now, he would have marveled at Ron's behavior; the young Weasley was strangely calm and collected, Malfoy's words seeming to have no reaction in him.

"Go about your business, Malfoy. You've got duties, remember?" Hermione condemned. The Slytherin's gray eyes slid over to her disdainfully, an angry frown carved in his face.

"I don't take orders from Mudbloods." he sneered.

"You will when she's Head Girl." Ron retorted. "Unless they're saving that position for you." Malfoy actually bristled, gaining a bit of color in his usually pallor cheeks. Next to him, Xenik's face contorted in contempt.

"You're not worthy of your prefect title, Big Brother Weasley," he judged, his accent thick with hate. Harry narrowed his eyes at the comment. What was the noxious-haired Slytherin playing at? Ron's eyes were thin slits as he slightly constricted his hand over his robe. "No Mudblood lover is."

"Stop calling her that, you prat," Harry was upset he was now more alert. "If anyone here isn't worthy, it's you two." Malfoy snorted elegantly and leered.

"I don't see you with a badge, Potter."

"And I don't see him with one, either." Harry pointed sarcastically to the badge-less Aves. Xenik was only a deputy, and he had borrowed the badge earlier from the real Aves prefects. Malfoy forced his eyes into slits.

"You know, Potter," he took a step forward. Harry impulsively slipped his hand on his wand. "You've been a thorn in my side for far too long."

"Likewise." Harry mustered enough loathing behind his voice to say such. Taking a challenging step forward, he glowered at the Slytherin.

"Just like your parents," he insulted, his voice dripping with venom. "Meddlers, and headstrong, too. The Dark Lord took care of them. He'll take care of you." Harry surprised himself with a highly amused snort. The opposing boys were taken aback slightly, but masked their expressions quickly. Even Ron and Hermione were stunned at the Gryffindor's response to the blonde boy's offense. Privately, the seeker seethed at Malfoy's scathing remark, but it wouldn't do well to be brash so early in the year.

"Malfoy, if that's the coldest thing you can come up with, you're really lousy." He shot back, raising his eyebrows. "I took care of your father, Malfoy. You're nothing but a pest, an insect, who can easily be the next stain on the back of the Daily Prophet." Hermione budged slowly beside Ron, her robes clattering noiselessly. Malfoy's only response was his redder face and heavier breaths. Xenik decided to make his presence known and jumped to Malfoy's defense.

"Mr. Malfoy got out," he replied. "Or have you not heard?" Harry's daring gaze flicked from the livid Slytherin to the smug Celestial. A light smirk played on the Boy-Who-Lived's lips and he eyed Xenik.

"On a technicality." He countered. "Only a matter of time before he's back in his favorite, grimy little cell. Hope he isn't getting used to being free Malfoy." Harry mock-gasped, and raised his hand to tap his chin. "Oh, but that's the ticket. He's never been free, what with serving Voldemort, and all." Ron and Draco both twitched slightly, Ron breaking his gaze between the cool Harry and the maddening Malfoy.

"How dare you, Potter?" he ground out between clenched teeth. Draco moved to whip his wand out, but Harry, being very nimble, flipped his out seconds before the Slytherin, a fleet of curses already racing across his mind. Both wand tips were pressed to the enemy's throat, neither boy moving to curse the other. Hermione's eyes widened at the sight, before sensibility took over.

"Malfoy, you're a prefect, and Harry, you can't attack him since he is such." She stated authoritatively. Both young men simply ignored her, their unblinking eyes glaring at each other. Harry vaguely believed he saw fear flit across the boy's silver eyes before it was quickly whisked away, leaving him to stare into the hard, icy orbs. The sixth years did not move from their position until voices and a sound was heard a few feet away in the next corridor, and Malfoy was the first to lower his wand, pressing slightly into Harry's jugular. The Gryffindor reluctantly did the same, keeping his eyes on the boy. Turning the corner, the five were met with bright periwinkle and white cloaks as Tam Xu, Icarus and Kaltag rounded the corner. Malfoy's face immediately fell into its usual sneer.

"What are you three doing here?" he demanded. Xenik puffed himself up a bit, glaring at the two Paraffins and ignoring Tam.

"Patrolling, genius, what do you think?" Icarus retorted, narrowing his eyes at the two. "What are you doing down here, so late?"

"He's obviously taking the dog for a walk," Kaltag taunted, glowering at Xenik. "Hasn't been trained, yet." The Aves' cheeks burned with unseen fire, and he unconsciously rubbed the palm of his right hand.

"Smythe." He hissed acerbically.

"Xenik." Kaltag matched.

"Potter." Malfoy spat.

"Malfoy." Hermione, Ron and Harry returned.

"Xu, Inigo, Weasley, Granger. There, we've all met." Icarus jokingly added. Xenik wasn't amused with the Black prefect's jokes, and his glare remained solely on Kaltagonus.



"We've some unfinished business." He reminded. Harry faintly spotted the flicker of silver across his hazel irises.

"We'll finish it on the field, Androcles," Kaltag replied. "It'll be one-sided, though." Just as Xenik was about to retort, and possibly, attack, Hermione jumped between the two groups and glared.

"Go back to your patrol, Malfoy." She ordered. "And you two." she rounded on Icarus and Kaltag, "continue with yours." She pulled out her wand and aimed it carefully between the two groups to show she meant business. With identical sneers, both Averins smartly took to the path from whence they came without conflict, turning down another corner. Ron and Harry let out sighs, one of relief, the other of annoyance. There was no way he'd be able to easily fall asleep now. Icarus broke the tense silence between the five by clearing his throat.

"I see what kept you guys." he began. Gesturing down the hallway, he smiled. "Shall we?" Quietly, the others agreed, heading back to Gryffindor tower, with Tam nervously behind them. Harry, now completely awake, was aware of the glares Hermione shot both him and Kaltag, her face crimson in anger.

"Can't believe you two," she hissed at both of them, whipping to glower at Kaltag. "And you're a prefect! Calling him a dog! Prefects don't insult others!"

"Well, this prefect does," he retorted. "And will continue to do so when he is threatened." Hermione scoffed loudly and huffed in anger.

"He never threatened you!"

"But he would have."

"You don't know that!"

"Well, he wasn't about to give me roses, Hermione."

"For all you know, he could have." She pointed out fiercely.

"Well, it didn't look like that when we happened upon the scene." Kaltag threw back. "The only way he'd give me flowers is if he's

cursed them or put a Muggle explosive in it." Ron, who remained silent and contemplative throughout the entire argument, gave the two bemused looks. Harry mused it must have been strange for the keeper to see Hermione arguing with someone other than him.

"Why would he give him roses?" he asked. Hermione and Harry rolled their eyes, bending around to the next hallway.

"To kill him, Ron." Icarus replied good-naturedly and seriously. Harry rubbed at his eyes to sense for drowsiness. No such luck.

"He wouldn't really kill you. Besides, why does he have it in for you anyway?" the redhead inquired. Kaltag just shrugged, flinging a strand of hair from his robe.

"Dunno. He's had it in for me since first year. Before we even met, he hated me."

"Why?" Harry asked. He and Draco had only become enemies when Harry hadn't taken his hand in friendship. He couldn't tell if Malfoy had hated him before then. Kaltag sucked his teeth and rocked his shoulders upward.

"I suppose he's jealous. I'll never know his deal."

"It's obvious, isn't it?" the quiet Asian Voltaire prefect queried in statement. Icarus and Kaltag looked back at her waiting for an explanation. "Your status," she spoke. "What you are, what you'll become." Both boys appeared confused at the girl's clarification. Rolling her eyes, Tam adjusted her oval spectacles and huffed.

"Exactly what am I, Tam?" Kaltag asked, a cold bite hidden under his tone. The Gryffindors' interest was just as peaked.

"You're Kaltag Smythe, Paraffin hero, son of Athena and Spiridon." She replied tonelessly. "Grandson to Zeus and Hera, heir to the throne of Olympus. Xenik's envious, of course." Kaltag's face contorted in perplexity.

"But why would he be jealous of him?" Icarus asked. "Xenik is also Zeus grandson." Tam nodded, fiddling with her white satin cloak.

"He may be," she nodded, pointing to the redhead Paraffin prefect. "But Kaltag is the High Celestial's main concern." Hermione digested all the information and nodded jerkily.

"Perhaps Xenik is just misunderstood." All the males jeered at her remark and glowered.

"Misunderstood is nearly slicing my neck with a sword, Hermione?" Kaltag reminded. The Gryffindor witch colored at the statement, looking at her shoes with interest.

"She also thought Kreacher was misunderstood," Ron murmured in Harry's ear. "What's with her and vile humans and creatures?" Harry shrugged and crammed his hands in his pockets, his hand brushing his pointy wand.

"There's nothing to misunderstand with Aves House," Icarus began. "You understand they're all evil, though." Tam hmphed and lifted her brow.

"A common prejudicial misconception." She diagnosed. "Unless you've been in the shoes of one, you can't say they're all evil. It isn't exactly uncomplicated for them."

"And whose shoes have you nicked and worn, Tam?" Icarus countered, looking at the girl boldly. Tam gave the boy a belittling, knowledgeable stare and crossed her arms, fixing her eyes on the ginger-haired Paraffin.

"Skefteite. Kalinichta, Kaltag." She responded, inclined her head to the others, and turned the corner to head to the Ravenclaw dormitories. The Celestial didn't reply to Tam's words, but watched with a troubled expression as she left down the dark corridor. Ron stared after the prefect, and faced the others.

"What did she say?"

"Think,' in Greek," Icarus answered. "And then 'good night.' Whatever she meant by that." The prefect set his gaze on his partner, as he answered, whose eyes didn't leave the spot facing forward. Walking the rest of the way in silence, the Paradors made it to the portrait of the Fat Lady, just as Endymion Magnus and her companion were coming around the corner. Harry sought Kaltag's

expression and held back a laugh as the boy's face brightened red, and his gaze shifted everywhere but the grinning face of Endymion.

Her escort, who Harry recognized as new DA Elite member Selene Magnus, produced a lively smile Harry thought ought to be banned during such late nights. Unlike her sister, Selene was a fifth year with long, straight raven hair and darker hazel eyes, which were always vivid with delight.

"Hello." Endymion greeted them all with a small grin. Eyeing Kaltag furtively, she smiled widely as his azure eyes locked with her hazel ones, and a tiny smile spread across his lips. The Fat Lady wafted herself with a white feather-covered fan, fixing a loose tendril in her overly twisted hair.

"Endymion." He addressed. Breaking his gaze, he looked to the female Voltaire. "Selene." The girl beamed and tilted her head to the side.

"Kaltag. Haven't seen you in a while," she spoke. "What've you been up to? Avoiding me?"

"Like the plague." Icarus jumped in, earning an elbow to the ribs, courtesy of Kaltag. Hermione threw the prefect a reproachful look while Harry and Ron held their amusement at bay. The Gryffindor portrait's eyes narrowed and she made a low noise of protest at the prefect's actions. She went unnoticed.

"I only saw you yesterday, Selene." The Being of Elements confessed. The Voltaire frowned lightly, before adorning her hips with her fists.

"Not nearly enough as I'd like to see of you." she pouted. Endymion's smile waned and she looked between her sister and housemate. Harry detected a slight tone of roguishness in the fifth-year's voice, and her suggestive eyebrow raise sealed his suspicion. Endymion stood beside her younger sister, an annoyed expression seeping through her cheerful mask before she schooled her visage. Clearing her throat, she sent both parties a respectful grin before glaring daggers at her sibling.

"Don't you have to be inside now?" she asked in an undertone, though her voice held a certain hardness and blatancy, which didn't

fool Harry in the least. Selene gave her older sister a look and pointed to the black and white badge on her alabaster robes glinting in the dim torchlight.

"Prefect, remember?" she harked back. Endymion was at a loss for words, but kept her glare firmly on her sister. Ignoring the female Paraffin, Selene swung her view back on the anxious Kaltag. "We're still on for tomorrow, right?" She asked the older prefect. Shaking himself out of his daze, Kaltag nodded.

"Uh, yes, we are. Five on the grounds?" he confirmed.

"A set date." She corroborated. Behind her, Endymion was looking more lost and confused through her failing glare. The Entity broke her gaze between the Voltaire and the top Paraffin, furthering her disoriented child image.

"What? Date?" she managed to speak as her sister walked away. Spinning on her heel, the younger year beamed, patting Kaltag on the shoulder affectionately.

"Kaltag's tutoring me in defense for Chiron's class," she explained, cocking her head to the side. "Thought you knew, Endy." The girl in question furiously shook her head and crossed her arms heatedly. Shrugging indifferently, Selene faced the Being, and giving him one last touch, succeeded in infuriating her sister with one last comment. "See you then, love." The girl intelligently sauntered down the corridor, whistling a merry tune. Though the Voltaire's comment was empty and without feeling, Harry suspected Endymion took it hard and as a reality. The poor girl looked like she'd been done over in the face. Her black lashes seemed to stand out more around her hazel eyes, burning with a flame of rage at her sister's retreating back.

"Ahem," the Fat Lady rudely interrupted. "Are you planning to state the password or will you be sleeping under my frame tonight?"

"Carpe occasus." Ron recited, and the portrait flew open to reveal the entrance to the common room. Hermione and a seething, yet silent Endymion walked in first, followed by the boys with Icarus bringing up the rear. The lounge was strangely void of many Gryffindors and Paraffins tonight, leaving only a few fourth, fifth and seventh years. The only sixth years awake were Starbuck and

Nikola, who both appeared to be nodding off on the couch. As the six entered, Endymion went straight to the staircase for the girls' dormitory, barely storming up the stone steps. Icarus reluctantly followed her, throwing the others perplexed looks.

Nikola was shaken awake by Hermione plopping between her and Starbuck, leaving Ron and Harry to take the armchairs. Kaltag settled on the floor without complaint, absently staring off into the fire, a preoccupied façade locked on his countenance. Merely by his body language, Harry had a feeling Kaltag did not want to let his siblings in on his cryptic conversation with Tam. Harry lowered his brows thoughtfully as he watched the orange light dance across the teenager's eyes.

The prefect reminded him vaguely of someone. His face looked troubled, his brows furrowed in deep contemplation, a haunted guise flowing over his face, as if he'd struggled and toiled for years. As if he was wrestling inwardly at this very moment. With his thin hands drawn protectively over his knees, and his shimmering cloak wrapped around his body, the Being looked small and distressed, his face weary, his shoulders low with burden. Narrowing his green eyes, it finally came to Harry.

He saw himself in Kaltag.

The young Being reminded him so much of the other side of his persona, the other face everyone believed to see every day. The Boy-Who-Lived. The future savior of the wizarding world. Wrinkling his raven eye mustaches, Harry lifted his searching orbs off the student. Kaltag was filthy rich, with a decided future as ruler of all Celestials, and a loving family to support him. He even had Entities vying for his affections, if he could see with his own eyes.

The prefect had rivals that bore no worthy match to his powers and determination. Harry fought the intense desire to scoff cynically and fell back gruffly into his stuffy chair. What could the boy possibly have to worry about? His life was a far cry from Harry's, who had a prophecy hanging over his head and power-hungry Dark Lord chasing after him year after year. Looking over your shoulder, watching for enemies seen and unseen. Not knowing if ever confrontation could be your last. The Being really had no idea what it was like to be him. Therefore, he should not appear so troubled.

A thick-furred black cat cantered down the stairwell and nestled by Nikola's legs. The Entity stroked the cat affectionately for a few minutes; Harry didn't notice when Nikola went up to bed, shortly followed by Hermione and the feline. Ron and Starbuck watched carefully as the bushy-haired witch ascended the stairs and disappeared. Ron noticed the Being of Dreams and Fancies watching the witch warily, and tapered his brown eyes somewhat. What seemed like minutes later, Starbuck announced his longing for his bed and left the three alone. All the other students had long gone to their dormitories.

Ron remained motionless on the armchair, staring ahead at a blank space. Kaltag's orbs were blindly focused on the dying fire, unblinking and glassy. The Gryffindor seeker's arms were folded across his chest as he studied the window off to the side. The pitch-blackness outside was only broken by the few white dots of stars overhead. No moon tonight. Lupin must be thrilled. Lupin. Sirius. He had been completely neglectful in writing to them.

True, it was only the second week of school, but by last year, he had already written to his godfather. He made a mental note to find time to write him tomorrow or Saturday morning. Now that the Order had Celestials and various other members, he wondered if Sirius was enjoying the old place a bit more. The Animagus was probably on a mission as he pondered, risking his life again for him. Risking his life so people like Neville, Ginny, and Luna didn't have to if the war got out of hand. People like Kaltag.

The brooding student blinked as if he mentally responded, but his eyes remained on the fire. Perchance he was having fancies over Tam Xu's words of wisdom. 'Think.' About what? She couldn't possibly mean rethink their rivalries. Slytherin and Aves had some warped sense of morals they concentrate on achieving. True, not all were evil. Those like Nott, Zabini, and the Aves' Ogilvy Murdock, Sloanne Wynne, and Uisdean Hansen proved as such. But those like Malfoy, Xenik and Pansy all countered them, showing the life of the wicked was far more entertaining. But are there those willing to take a gamble with such a mirage? Obviously, as Voldemort still had and gained followers.

The hour continued to progress and the boys lingered in their unmoving, silent positions until the last embers of the fire smoldered portentously. Quite suddenly, Ron and Kaltag ceased their stream of

thoughts and stood, as if the fire brought them well out of a trance. Standing, the boys headed for the stairwell.

"Coming, Harry?" Kaltag called, his throat somewhat hoarse. Blinking rapidly with exhausted eyes, Harry glanced at the clock in the last dregs of orange light, finding it was nearing the midnight hour. Had they really been thinking that long, and in silence? Standing up, the Gryffindor followed his mates tiredly up the stairs, glad to have the feeling of slumber tug at his conscious.

...

Dear Snuffles,

Everything all right over there? Things back at Hogwarts are a bit hectic this time around, what with an entire new school here. I've followed your advice and made new friends. You may have heard of them. The Smythes, along with some others. Awesome powers, these Celestials have.

Sorry I haven't written to you sooner. With Quidditch and the organization, along with piles of essays and homework, I'm lucky I can get a quill in edgewise. Ron and I have agreed to become co-captains for Quidditch, and the headmaster gave the go ahead to restart the club properly. The event that only seeks to plague burdened minds like mine (or at the moment, just me) occurred earlier that morning, so I informed him.

I haven't caught wind of any adventures yet, and I don't think I will so early in the year. I'm off to do some schoolwork now. Be sure to say hello to everyone for me, especially Moony.

Best, Harry

PS – Let Moony know my new defense teacher says he was the best and most proper instructor we ever had. The entire class (mostly all) agreed.

Harry reread the parchment over and folded it twice. Beside him, on the nearest perch was Hedwig, preening her wings before she took off. Walking over to her, Harry listened to the sickening crunch of rodents' bones beneath his shoes and the strident hooting of school and student owls overhead, in the rafters of the vaulted ceiling.



Numbers of the birds doubled since Celestials now owned the magical messengers, despite their personal postman, Hermes. The glassless windows of the Owlery poured out bright yellow sunlight, glittering off Harry's round-rimmed glasses. Faithful Hedwig hooted happily, flapping her wings as he drew near.

"Hiya, Hedwig," he greeted, stroking her chest with his fingers. The owl released a low hoot and leaned into the touch, lovingly pinching his finger between her beak. "Letter for you to deliver. For Sirius." He bowed close to the bird and spoke the last statement, even though he was the only one present amongst the feathery messengers. A flash of glossy white caught his vigilant eyes and glancing upward, he spotted the silvery-white owl, Argentum circling overhead. Kaltag's owl soared effortlessly out of the windows and back in again, before settling on a rafter near Mercury, Starbuck's red owl. Looking back at his owl, Harry grinned as Hedwig blinked her large, amber eyes and hooted. He handed her the letter and she held it fast in her beak.

"Safe journey, all right?" The snowy owl brought her wings up and down to gain a strong gust, then took off out the window. The Gryffindor unconsciously watched as the reliable messenger flew off into the vast golden sky, until he could see her no more. Turning to walk out, Harry realized the déjà vu of the entire situation. Just last year around this time, Cho Chang kept him company in the Owlery, while sending a package off somewhere. They had a nice, civil conversation, before Filch rushed in and made false accusations of Harry sending off orders for Dungbombs. Cho, of course, leapt in to defend him, more or less shifting the blame further on him. That was past, when he couldn't even be around the girl without feeling his internal organs performing acrobatics. Walking out of the Owlery, Harry made his way back to Gryffindor tower to gather his things for his classes.

He hoped Sirius would respond soon. That was, if he was even in the UK.

...

"Eighteen inches on the Disillusionment Charm, two rolls of parchment on Cross-Elemental Switches, and three rolls on the Aging Potion." Ron seethed. "At least Jace got him to lower it to three, rather than the six he'd have us write." The others agreed,

gripping their sacks tightly, as they trudged to Gryffindor Tower after their last class that day.

"And we've got the planet alignment chart due for Cosmo and Sinistra, we haven't done that yet, Ron," Harry reminded. "Anything else?"

"Your Charms essay," Hermione answered after muttering the password to the primly dressed Fat Lady, who was admiring herself in her compact. Entering, the six claimed the couches and tables by the fire, dumping their belongings on it. "And weren't you complaining about Divination homework?" The boys groaned at the prompt, sagging annoyingly in their seats. Ron threw his head back onto the chair, staring at the high ceiling.

"Oneiromancy and Botanomancy." Starbuck grumbled. Nikola playfully pat him sympathetically on the head, and turned to Hermione.

"We've got Runes work for Osgood," she stated. "And you have History of Celestiaity and Magic homework for Einar and Binns." Kaltag lazily stood and slumped his bag on her shoulder, before Endymion walked in the common room and took a seat at the far table. She followed the boy with her eyes stealthily, but said nothing in greeting to any of them. Nikola and Hermione went up to their dormitories at separate times, Starbuck's eyes following them both.

"I've got to tutor Selene." Kaltag declared. "Later." He turned back to the portrait and exited. Hermione returned with another set of books, which she unsuccessfully tried to stuff into her already overfilled bag. She surrendered, carrying most of her books in her hand and faced Starbuck with a nervous smile.

"Ready?" she queried. Nodding, Starbuck stood and clutched his sack. Ron's head swiftly rose from the pillow and he stared bewilderedly between both Paradors. Across the room, Endymion Magnus lifted her knapsack to her shoulder and slipped out of the common room. Hermione and Starbuck headed to follow her.

"Ready'? Where're you two going?" he questioned, irritation clearly shining in his vibrant, brown eyes. The clever witch turned to her prefect partner.

"The library. Starbuck and I are studying there." Ron spluttered, his ears glowing the familiar shade of crimson.

"Why can't you study here? In the common room?" he asked a bit fiercely. Rolling her russet eyes, Hermione grasped her books tighter. Starbuck looked edgily at Ron and Hermione, before he backed slowly to the door. Harry could feel the anger Ron was exuding.

"Because the common room doesn't have the books we need, Ron," she stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "We'll be at dinner. You know where we are if you need us." Starbuck held the portrait open for Hermione, and they both disappeared down the hall. Harry hesitantly swung his attention back to his teed off co-captain, whose countenance was incensed with quite a shade of ruby. His brown eyes brimmed with such hostile anger, and Ron roughly grabbed his leather carrier, yanked the latch open and tossed the books on the table before the hearth. Harry couldn't find the words to soothe his friend, as he did not know why Ron was angry. Starbuck and Hermione were obviously heading to the library to study. Was he upset because they hadn't invited him? Hermione did say she was going to the library yesterday night. Why would the prefect be so irate with her?

The Weasley made much disturbance when he seized his parchment and quills and ink, throwing open his Potions book to start on his essay. Harry uneasily slid off his chair to his own bag on the floor, and took out his defense book. Ron said nothing to him, his face too purple to form words. His breathing was heavy, filled with unbridled anger, and every exhale of air seemed to make the common room overcast. If Harry didn't know any better, he'd say the redhead's anger was directed not at Hermione, but at their dorm mate.

"Krum dumps her, then she moves on to study." he snarled sarcastically, scribbling untidily on his parchment. Harry didn't answer, but kept to his task of unpacking parchment, ink, and quills. The flame-haired boy grumbled furiously to himself, taking his rage out on the parchment and quill. The Gryffindor seeker carefully closed his leather carrier and opened his defense book, his quill ready to work on the advantages and disadvantages of the Disillusionment Charm. After reading a few pages on the charm, Harry wrote over nine inches of explanation on the spell, nearing the

end of the essay. Ten minutes later, he chanced a glance at the still fuming Gryffindor prefect, noting nervously the boy was still red in the face, but he was almost amazingly done with his first parchment in the potions essay. Perhaps Hermione and Starbuck should go to the library more often, if it gets Ron to work quickly.

...

Two hours after Hermione and Starbuck left, Harry was pleased to note he had completed his work for Defense, Divination, Charms, and Astronomy, and was now writing his first sentence for the Potions essay. Transfiguration would be done later that night, to free up his weekend for Quidditch tryouts and defense. He surprised even himself, at how quickly he was doing his homework, since most were due by the middle or end of next week. Perhaps Hermione was rubbing off too much on him.

Ron, he noticed, kept glancing at the door an hour after the two left, expecting them to show up soon. Dinner was but over an hour away, and the redhead took to glaring at anyone entering the now full common room. The portrait swung open to admit Circe and Isabella, followed by a straight-faced Ella Burton. Hermione seemed very suspicious of the girl and the details of her arrival, and Harry could see where she was coming from. The girl rarely spoke to anyone, let alone her own dorm mates, and was as proficient in spells as a standard sixth year. He never heard her speak, but Hermione did say she was English. The portrait let in Thanos and Yorick, making Ron grunt in frustration. Slamming his fists on the table, the Weasley growled. Everyone in the lounge directed his or her glares at him, the first years shaking in the far corner.

"That's it!" he pronounced, rolling up his scrolls and shoving his books in his bag roughly. Harry's eyebrows were lost in his bangs, staring at his barmy mate. All eyes were on Ron as he violently slung his bag over his shoulder, and without a word, stormed out of the common room. Harry had the urge to get up and follow him, but something told him the prefect needed to be alone. Activities halted by Ron's outburst continued on, but others threw Harry questioning looks he couldn't answer.

Half an hour before dinner, Harry spotted a familiar mane of red hair descending the steps. Turning to greet the girl and only Gryffindor chaser, Harry paused, blinking as Ella Burton moved down the steps

with a heavy book, and occupied the chair Ron had left thirty minutes ago. She gave Harry a courteous smile, which he returned, and opened the book. The cover looked old, worn, and weather beaten, but he didn't see the title. Ella's eyes focused on the book before her, her brows creasing in concentration. She habitually tucked a long red strand of hair behind a delicate ivory ear, and resumed her reading. Harry's emerald eyes narrowed faintly over the rim of his spectacles, as he studied the girl. His quill was suspended over his essay, the dark ink hanging precariously on the sharp edge of the utensil. He quickly returned to his essay, his jade eyes flitting every now and then over to the cagey girl.

Some noise was heard from the staircase, and Harry watched as Ginny came down with Colin, Dean, and Jack Sloper. The sixth year slit his eyes slightly, eyeing the boys around the youngest Weasley. Ginny was always surrounded by boys. Was she that much of an attention seeker, or did they just flock around her all the time? At the thought of who her 'boyfriend of the week' might be, Harry's eyes widened when the chaser's eyes caught his. Her smile made Harry grin dopily, and he mentally shook himself from his asinine behavior. Why was he acting this way? He never gave a second thought about Ginny's love life before.

The Gryffindor assumed all his previous actions were answered when Circe and Philo Balthazar emerged from behind the young Weasley. Dozens of slack-faced, silly-smiling boys and girls of various years followed the sibling Celestials of Love, and of the two, only Philo seemed bothered. Harry's eyes followed the striking Entity until she and her younger brother left the lounge. Ginny sat by herself at the table behind Ella's chair, dropping her heavy subject books on it. Gathering his things, Harry moved away from the hearth to sit by his chaser, and both shared smiles as he sat.

"Ready for tomorrow's try outs?" she asked him, scripting her name on top of the parchment. The golden rays of the setting sun cascaded from the window above their table, lighting the area well with warmth.

"Yeah," Harry answered. "How many do you think will turn out?"

"Lots of younger years, with the exception of first," Ginny responded, flipping a page in her Transfiguration book. "Colin and Dennis are trying out, too." Harry emitted an ill moan, and his face turned a bit

green. Ginny giggled in amusement, shaking her head. "At least their hands will be occupied with brooms and not cameras." Harry nodded; this was true.

"Right." He answered. The same black cat from the previous night trotted down the stone steps and leapt into the armchair Harry had evacuated, curling into a tuft of black fur on the burgundy seat.

"Kenward was talking about Apparation tests at the end of next year for the sixth years," Ginny spoke. "Planning on taking it?" Harry was taken aback by the question, as he hadn't heard that from his defense instructor. The male shrugged.

"I guess. Haven't heard about that." The entrance swayed open letting the Entity Endymion Magnus in. Harry had to squint to look at her, since she looked nothing like she did before she left. Her white face was marred with small streaks of dirt, and her wavy black hair stuck out in strange directions, with bits of twigs and greenery in it. Ginny did her best to stifle her laughter as the girl passed to head up the stairs, and let loose as the Celestial disappeared.

"What was she doing?" she managed to say between cackles. Harry couldn't help but smile and returned to his essay.

"I think she was in the bushes, spying and all." He replied. His conjecture was validated when Kaltag Smythe walked slowly into the common room, wearing trainers, gray sweat pants, a white tank top, and clutching his bag. His Paraffin house robe hung out of the corner of the bag, wrinkled and covered with dirt. He wondered if the Paraffin and Selene Magnus had spotted Endymion, but by the look on his face, they hadn't. Sweat trailed down his fit arms, sliding into his loose shirt, and the prefect went up the stairwell, no doubt to take a shower.

Incessant tapping was heard on the window above Harry and Ginny's table, and a massive, blurry figure shadowed Harry's light. The seeker's eyes widened, before quickly creasing his eyebrows. Ginny stood to unlatch the window and let Hedwig flutter in, ruffling her feathers proudly.

"Hedwig?" he questioned. In her beak was a small scroll of parchment, and Harry swiftly took it from her. Ginny cocked her ginger head to the side and slanted her lips, petting Hedwig.

"You weren't expecting a letter?" she inquired by the look on his face. Hedwig flapped out the open window.

"Not so soon." He voiced, unraveling the letter.

Dear Harry,

Good to hear from you so soon.

"Likewise." He murmured to himself, making Ginny lower her brows.

Congratulations on making captain! Ron's parents and brothers are thrilled with the news. I expect you two'll be receiving a box as heavy as a hippogriff full of fudge and sweets from Molly. Things are fine at headquarters, with many coming and going. Glad to hear you've made friends, especially with the Smythes. I will be out of the country for a few weeks, but I will have the mirror. You know what to do. By the way, Moony is glad to have someone who isn't a complete dunderhead praise him on his work. That's put more of a spring in his step. He's out of town, also. And if you keep having those odd dreams, continue to tell the headmaster. Let me know when the next Hogsmeade weekend is. Keep at it.

Snuffles

The missive was short, but at least he had heard from his godfather. The girl across from him stopped her writing to eye the note. At her questioning glance, Harry folded the note.

"Snuffles." The young chaser nodded, returning to her work.

"Tell him I'm still awaiting ideas for pranks." She joked. "When did you send the letter?" Harry stuffed the scroll in his pants and folded his arms.

"This morning."

"Hmm," she hummed. "He must be close by." Inclining his head, Harry knotted his eyebrows. Sirius was on a mission of some sort. And judging by how quickly his response came, he was in close range to Hogwarts. Commotion ignited in the common room as many students got up and headed out of the portrait hole. Ginny

snapped her book shut and put her things in her bag, followed by Harry. "Must be dinner, then." The raven feline on the chair awoke, and after stretching, took off up the stairs again. Ella remained reading on the chair, ignoring the racket her housemates caused by leaving and packing up. Ginny and Harry left with the others, not bothering to wait for any of their friends.

The two chatted all the way to the Great Hall, about everything from classes to Quidditch to the DA, which Ginny expressed her enthusiasm to begin. Off to the side, Harry spotted Michael and Cho with a few of their Ravenclaw friends, including last year's Defense Association saboteur, Marietta Edgecombe. 'SNEAK' was still clearly visible on her face, and Ginny smirked.

"Wonder how her life's been." She conversed. "Never knew Hermione's retribution could be so malevolent." Both Gryffindors chuckled loudly and entered the jam-packed hall. As Harry settled beside Ginny at the Parador table, he swore he saw the Ravenclaw seeker glower at the red-haired fifth year.

...

".... I think he's really good." Andrew Kirke commented while sitting in one of the top boxes on the Quidditch Pitch. "I mean, he knocked the bludger clear away from Ginny."

"He's right, Harry." Ron agreed, doodling on his parchment. "And he worked well with Andrew." Harry nodded, itching his chin. The four members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team sat in one of the teachers' stands on the field. The trials had been a great turn out and success, where Harry and Ron could easily spot the talent and determination out of the testers who had never even played the game before. Now, contrary to mere minutes before, the field was empty and the sun was setting over the hoops. Silence slithered below the group on the field, with only tiny chirps shattering the air. "I'd choose him."

"Ginny?" Harry turned to the girl. Nodding, Harry sighed and set his Firebolt by Ginny's Cleansweep. "Okay, Merrick Linwood is the new beater." Kirke smiled widely and rocked back and forth in his seat in celebration. "Chasers, Ginny?"

"Warner and Schmetterling." She reported. "I worked easily with them, and they can score goals. We need a bit more work as a unit,



though." Harry nodded. He was beat from the four hours on the pitch they spent auditioning talent. Hermione and a few Celestials stuck around for the first hour, before they retreated inside. Luckily for them, they weren't exhausted and smelly.

"Ron?"

"I've no problem with them." He answered, just as dog-tired.

"Andrew?"

"I'm fine with them."

"Louise Schmetter-what's-it and Madeleine Warner are the new chasers." He announced to the team. "Reserves."

"Seeker."

"Standish." The all spoke simultaneously. "Powerful third year." Ginny remarked.

"Caught the snitch in just under forty." Harry added.

"It's decided then." Ron settled. "Keeper?"

"I'd say Colin," Kirke stated. He saved eight out of fifteen and handled well."

"But Gerard saved twelve out of fifteen," Harry reminded. "He could use work on maneuverability." Ron inclined his head and chewed on the end of his quill.

"My job. Right. Bingham it is." He confirmed. "Beaters?"

"Wyatt and Wallis were exceptionally good." Kirke voiced. "They handle oddly, but they could at least hit the ball, unlike some of them." Harry cringed when he remembered what Kirke referred to. Dennis Creevey had tried out for beater, which was a major mistake. Instead of hitting the ball, sometimes he would miss it. And if he did hit it, it was toward the crowd. None of them could risk the excitable boy on their team.

"Right." Ginny concurred, rubbing her leg tenderly. "Nearly took my legs off, they did. Therefore, I go with Hoffenhoch and Townsend."

"Agreed." Was the vote of the board.

"Chasers." Harry began. "Frobisher, Dugan, and Abercrombie. For a second year, Euan's pretty fast. I'd put him on the current team, but then I'd have to find a first year replacement for him. And nippers aren't allowed."

"Top," Ron exclaimed. "Abercrombie was wicked."

"Carleigh Dugan and Vicky Frobisher worked well," Andrew noted. "I could see them working well in the future."

"Andrew's right." Ginny backed up. "They were good." Harry covered his mouth from his yawn, standing to his feet.

"Well, that settles it," he concluded. "We'll post the list tomorrow. Let's get showered, eh?" The group collectively agreed and each individually grabbed their broom.

"I don't have much pleasure smelling like wet dog," Ginny scrunched her nose and drawled. She furtively sent a glance to Harry, an impish glint in her bright chocolate eyes. Mounting her broom, she smirked and glanced back at the seeker. "Or being around a few of them." Kicking off, the chaser dived to the ground, her red hair whipping behind her like fire. Ron grumbled behind Harry, as Kirke took off.

"I'll show that witch wet dog..." Ron mumbled, dropping after Kirke. As Ginny raced across the field to the locker rooms, a small smile lingered on Harry's lips. Ginny had a fiery spirit and mischievous nature. He wondered how he missed such an important thing as they spent five years of school and summers together.

...

Kaltag, Starbuck, Icarus, and six other Celestials entered the Room of Requirement Sunday evening, looking worn-out and worked. The only one with a cheerful, exuberant expression was Arthur Gilliam, the Paraffin Sliatyckx head captain and enthusiast. The upbeat boy walked with a sort of spring in his step and took a seat at the back of

the room on a fluffy beige cushion. The sixth year Paraffin players gave Harry apologetic grins, taking their places throughout the room.

"Sorry, Harry," Kaltag apologized, ruffling his messy, soaked hair. "Practice ran through a bit later than expected." Harry, who was sitting on top of a short bookshelf, swinging his legs in bored fascination, waved the Being off, knowing firsthand that a late practice meant the captain was a bit to keen during the rehearsal.

"Don't worry about it." The noised level in the Come and Go Room was especially loud, since most of the DA Elite members were already present. Hermione was caught up in deep reading of a defense book, but greeted Starbuck with a tiny acknowledging smile as he sat next to her. Harry raised his eyebrow when Kaltag and Icarus sat with Selene, Tam and Raelin Maddox, a reserve Orber for the Paraffin team. Endymion's once bright face fell considerably as Isis and Etienne Flannery continued to chat in low tones beside her. She forlornly pushed aside a downy emerald cushion away, somewhat resentfully eyeing her younger sister.

Half of the self-proclaimed couple of the year, Cho Chang, sat in the back, engaging in dull conversation with Entity of Intelligence, Isabella Lancaster. Without her other half attached to her, she looked bare, and isolated. And a still prickling Ron chose to sit around the center of the room with spacey Luna, Ginny and Neville. Ella Burton was hidden between a few Voltaires and Brittlebores, glancing every now and then at her peers. Peeking at the clock, Harry lowered his eyebrows. None of the Slytherins and Aves had appeared. He was supposed to start the meeting minutes ago, but delayed it, hoping they would already be here.

Hermione snapped her book shut to indicate the meeting should start, but Harry hesitated. Nott and Zabini were thrilled to make it into the Elite. They wouldn't just fail to show up at the first one. He may not have know them well, but he knew they could not have falsified their reactions and feelings so well. At Hermione's insistent throat clearing (and Ron's menacing glower in her direction), Harry leapt off the shelf with reluctance, and immediately, all conversation ceased. Examining the eager faces of wizards and Celestials before him, the shining eyes, the excitement crackling in the air, Harry inhaled deeply, greeting them all with small smiles.

"Welcome to the first gathering of the Defense Association, Elite." He initiated. "You have all done well in your e-exams to be here," he kept glancing at the door. "And I congratulate, er, you on your achievement." A light applause broke out, somewhat stiff, but applause nonetheless. Zacharias Smith eyed the burnt mannequin in the corner behind Harry and paled. Looking back at the door, Harry let out an inaudible sigh. They weren't coming. Hermione and Ron, he noticed, gave him worried looks, but he ignored them. "Uh, today, we will review the Impediment Jinx, followed with a Hex-Deflection Charm," a few fourth years gasped in awe, brimming with excitement. "So, I'll teach you the theory and—"

The door squeaked open slowly, and a dark hand clasped around the frame. Attached to the hand was a shiny, violet cloak, and Ogilvy Murdock, a sixth year Aves student. Behind him, Sloanne Wynne of Aves, Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott appeared to be looking around the area, before throwing Harry a look. The Gryffindor—as well as everyone else in the DA—eyed the quartet in uncertainty, all but Harry mistrustful. Finally entering the room and closing the door behind them, the four boys clutched their carriers with them, before discarding them quickly by the door. The males were docile, and their shifty eyes flicked over the room and Harry. Nott rubbed his upper arm tenderly, anxiety carved in his countenance. His eyes were droopy, and he looked fatigued and hassled.

"Er, sorry." Sandy-haired Blaise spoke up. Ron's face contorted in disbelief and his eyebrow elevated as the four tiptoed through the crowd to find available seats in the back, Nott stroking his left arm gently. The Slytherins and Aves gave each other cautious looks as they settled in. Many of the students still looked at the boys with wariness, but turned their focus mainly on their silent leader. Hermione shuffled in a comfortable position on her cushion, bringing Harry from his daze. The Elite were still waiting for him to continue, despite the interruption.

"So, the incantation for the Hex-Deflection Charm is 'Parcomalum.' If you say it with enough feeling and concentrate hard, you can deflect the simplest spells." Harry lectured. Hermione was on the edge of her pillow, drinking every word. Harry tucked his hands in front of him and surveyed the group. "Every one, repeat the incantation after me, one two, three...."

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As the last Paradors, Ravenaires and Hufflebores shut the door behind them, Harry, Ron, Kaltag and Thanos all stacked a few cushions along the wall, cleaning up after their meeting. A few students were still hanging around, getting a few more pointers from resident genius Hermione. Many of the students learned the deflection spell quickly, with the exception of a few fourth and fifth years. Sir Unfort, short for 'Unfortunate,' the mannequin lay in worse shambles than the last time, with half his stuffing seeping from its proclaimed abdomen. Endymion Magnus incanted her Impediment Jinx incorrectly (and pointed it in the wrong direction, too), ripping the poor dummy to shreds. The thing Harry found suspiciously odd, was the model was in one corner of the room near Selene and Kaltagonus' group, while Endymion was supposed to be facing the other way.

The Slytherins and Aves did surprisingly well, considering many of the skeptical glowers they were subject to. Harry was especially glad he didn't need to peel a Gryffindor off of any of them; and there were no skirmishes, save Zacharias and an irate Ron clashing about what Harry should teach from now on. Luckily, Hermione knew the countercurse for the Vanishing Mouth Curse ("Abeolabiae!") Ron flung over his shoulder at the Hufflepuff. Needless to say a few students were upset with the Gryffindor prefect from removing the well-deserved curse. Shoving the bolsters back into the corner, Harry clapped his hands together, watching as the Beings and Ron walk off to assist Hermione with stacking books. The inquisitive Gryffindor's bottle green eyes scanned the seemingly empty room as the fourth years exited. Curiously, he realized the Slytherins were still present.

Off to the side, the Slytherins and Aves were gathering their abandoned bags. Sloanne whispered something to Ogilvy, prompting the boy to check his watch and curse under his breath. Harry narrowed his eyes, and kneeled before the pillows, to pretend to stack them meticulously neatly. Swearing inwardly, Harry cursed himself for sending Starbuck ahead to make sure the hallway paths were free from traps and other things. Were he here at the moment, he would probably be able to tell the Gryffindor if they were planning something. Zabini and Nott eyed their Aves mates with confounded expressions; more words were exchanged, and after a few murmurs and nods, the Celestials departed. Odd.

Fluffing a particularly gaudy pillow, Harry scrutinized the remaining Slytherins out of the corner of his eye. As Nott lifted his sack to his shoulder, the boy faltered, dropping the bag to the ground, and gripping his arm. Ignoring his pointless clean up, Harry stood from his corner and took a few strides to get to the sixth years. Nott and Zabini glanced between each other before meeting the approaching Harry's gaze. Stuffing his hands in his pockets and grazing the smooth wood of his wand, Harry offered the boys respectful smiles.

"Potter." Zabini greeted. Nott inclined his head, massaging his arm through his dark robe.

"Ah, 'lo." Harry acknowledged, studying their expressions. Both seemed nervous. For what, he hadn't a clue. Better to get to the point and thwart any evil plans in the making. "Anything wrong?" The wiry boy Nott briefly met gazes with Harry before looking down.

"Nothing." Blaise easily lied. Harry had dealt with Slytherins for almost six years. He knew their lying habits by now. Theodore's eyes moved about the room, not bothering to settle on Harry. His arm was obviously still bugging him, as he continued to rub it. By the bookshelves, heavy clunks could be heard as the boys and Hermione fixed the tomes. Shifting from foot to foot, Nott attempted to pick up his carrier again. Gripping the arm of the bag, the Slytherin hesitated before letting it drop. He couldn't carry it with his bad arm. Harry raised an eyebrow. The boy seemed to be hurt.

"Something wrong?" he questioned.

"No," Blaise cut in quickly. "Nothing at all." Harry smirked mockingly.

"Right." He replied. "And I'm Umbridge's mother-in-law." Zabini threw the Gryffindor an annoyed look, pulling his bag higher on his shoulder. "Something's wrong." The sandy-haired boy sneered.

"Why do you assume so?" Harry tilted his head back and forth, before crossing his arms.

"For one, he can't even pick up his bag properly. And two, you all are beady-eyed and dodgy. Three, his arm's hurt." The last was pure speculation, but the way the Slytherin reacted gave it away. "Murdock and Wynne are a bit tetchy, too. Ergo, something is awry." The three were silent, only hearing Hermione and Ron fuss and

bicker in the back about spell books. Blaise opened his mouth to retort, but Nott ceased further words.

"You're right." He had a deep voice, a bit coarse and weary. Harry loosened his folded arms and remained tacit for an explanation. "No one knows we've joined the DA." He admitted. Harry suspected as much, with their amateur security precautions, but it didn't explain the boy's behavior. "Malfoy wanted to know where we were headed, and I didn't tell him." The Gryffindor lowered his black eyebrows.

"You refused Malfoy?" Nott and Zabini looked scandalized.

"It's not like it's hard." Blaise drawled in disbelief. Harry scoffed and rolled his eyes.

"If you're a Slytherin, that is." The seeker countered. Blaise glowered as his partner continued.

"I didn't answer, so he had Vince—er, Crabbe, try to threaten me." He gestured to his bruised body part. "Hence, the arm." Harry nodded, somewhat in doubt. Sighing, Nott hoisted the bag up with his good arm. "I didn't tell him. He thinks we're off at the library studying." The messy-haired teen vacantly nodded, taking in the new information.

"Sorry." He expressed regret. "For this causing all the trouble." Zabini folded his arms and quirked his lips to the side.

"It isn't trouble if it's going to help us with N.E.W.T.s," he retorted, before his hard countenance softened. "And the war." Watchful of the regretful visage of the Defense Association's leader, Nott itched his side.

"Don't worry about us, mate." He reassured. "Survival of the fittest in Slytherin house. We can take care of ourselves. See you next meeting, then?" At the Gryffindor's nod, both boys left, closing the door soundlessly behind them. Harry blankly stared at the door, voices of squabbling Ron, Hermione, with an occasional Kaltag and Thanos, breaking into his thoughts every now and then from the background.

So, the Slytherins bullied their own housemates. Giving it the preposterous title of 'survival of the fittest.'

Doing what they must, even if it's harming their own kind.

Tam was right.

It wasn't all roses and sweets for them. Turmoil and distrust within their own house.

Clearly, it wasn't easy being in Slytherin.

Harry was now more appreciative of the fact he was right. And was still so, for six years running.

The teenager was relieved he made the right selection in choosing Gryffindor.

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A/N: Revised chapter.

A/N 2: Skefteite means 'think' in Greek. I roughly translated it. But I know kalinichta means 'good night.' And yes, I know, Tam Xu is Asian. But she's a pureblooded Celestial.

A/N 3: I made up the Hex-Deflection Spell, since there was no HP site with the incantation. Parco, Latin for 'to avoid,' and malum for 'damage,' or 'evil.' Much shorter than Cunctatiomalum....

Chapter Twelve Clues:

- 1). Fast forward into next month. We learn more about Kaltag.
- 2). We finally get to see Hagrid.
- 3). Harry in the spotlight.

Review and let me know which character you'd like to know more about (out of those I introduced, or those on the Yahoo Group list).



## Chapter Twelve: Color Me Normal

Tap...tap...tap...tap....

"...ah, yes," the telltale melodic, mournful tone of Professor Trelawney rang through the class. She heaved a dramatic sigh and shook her head slightly, rotating the ceramic cup of tea leaves between her long fingers. "Dreadful, yes. Dreadful." Ron rolled his eyes and pursed his lips.

Tap...tap...tap...

"This...space," she pointed a heavily jeweled finger at a lightly speckled ivory spot surrounded by dregs of their morning tea. "Which is clearly a disruption in your weakened aura, indicates absence."

Tap...tap...tap...tap....

A few audible shuffles were heard on the side of the room. Some sighs were thrown, and a few bored comments were low enough to escape Trelawney's ears, not all of them from students. Harry fought back a yawn, rapidly blinking the weariness from his eyes. The professor's magnified, bug-like eyes held false sorrow, and widened as she studied the teacup's contents once more. Tsking with a shaking head, she rocked the cup back and forth a bit, but not without a few theatrical grimaces in between.

"Yes, you poor dear," Ron muttered something unintelligible and rested his head on one of his hands, twirling his quill with the other. Trelawney exhaled noisily, nibbling her bottom lip. "Gruesome, that will be." A jaded sigh escaped from beside Harry.

Tap...tap...

"Can you please stop that persistent tapping?" an irked Lavender Brown's voice was heard several tables over. Those who were awake glanced at the peeved Gryffindor and her companion, Parvati Patil, before swinging to the back to identify the student with the noisy quill. Even Professor Trelawney annoyingly set her large eyes on Ella Burton, who had raised an eyebrow at her dorm mate. Lavender returned the gesture and crossed her arms threateningly. "You are interfering with Professor Trelawney's aura."

"Yeah," Parvati supported, mimicking her best friend's stance. "She won't be able to predict anything with your racket." The red-haired Gryffindor prefect silently scoffed.

"She couldn't predict anything without the tapping, either." Harry, Thanos, and Kaltag snickered at Ron's comment, but kept their eyes on their year mates. The divination instructor rolled the cup between her fingers, setting it down, and narrowing her eyes at the Gryffindor sixth year. Ella stared pointedly at Lavender, and tapped her quill a few more times for spite. At her huff, the redhead set her quill down and folded her hands before her, a broad smile forming on her face.

"Oh, dear. My apologies." She began, although her musical tone was laced with deceit. "Wouldn't want to flummox your...aura." Her dorm mates nodded with sneering expressions and turned to Trelawney, like doting pets. The eccentric divination instructor creased her eyebrows at the Gryffindor, advancing to the back of the room. Staring down at the complacent sixth year, Trelawney cautiously picked up Ella's cup and her fingertips massaged the pink floral printed tea cup.

"Your aura is strong." she complimented the young lady. Parvati and Lavender scoffed quietly to themselves, shaking their heads in disgust. Ella raised a red brow at her instructor, drumming her smooth fingertips inaudibly on the dark cherry table before her. "A puzzle, you are, Miss Burton. The only within this room with such a potent ambience." Lavender and Parvati harrumphed, scowling at their fellow housemate. Trelawney's misty voice settled over the room mysteriously. "Not many can handle the power of a true Seer." Ron snorted under his breath shaking his head.

"Not many can handle the obscene heat of this class—or that fraud either." He muttered, winking at Harry. But the Boy-Who-Lived did not smile. In fact, he frowned deeply. As Trelawney went on about the power of true Seers and auras, his mind weighed heavily on the prophecy. If it hadn't been for 'the fraud,' he would not have learned the foresight. And he probably wouldn't have such an advantage over the maniacal wizard, slight though it may be. He never thought he would be so unsettled that his longest-known friend would ridicule the woman that predicted his future. Ron wrinkled his eyebrows at his best friend's expression. The sixteen-year-old appeared pensive, and clearly was not pleased.

"She's not a fraud, Ron." He endorsed. Ron, clearing his head with a shake and replaying the seeker's words in his head, stared at him as if he had grown a hand from his forehead.

"Right," he began jokingly. "And I moonlight as a Weird Sister every now and then. You can't be serious, Harry." True, they had been calling Trelawney a fraud for the better of three years now. Harry just couldn't change his opinion this quickly. The black-haired boy shot his friend a disagreeable look before focusing back on the woman.

"Times change, Ron." The redhead made a noise of disagreement and glared at Harry, but it lacked true malice.

"Yeah, and so do people. Obviously." The prefect roughly crossed his arms, his ears turning red, and tried to lean back into his pouf; had the two not been so grave, it would have been an amusing situation, as the plush chairs did not have back rests. Huffing in frustration, Ron settled for tilting away from Harry and toward the now snoozing Thanos. Harry sighed deeply, running a pale hand through his raven tresses.

"Ron, I don't want to argue."

"Too late."

"It's just—" Harry's words hung in the air as he realized what the impact would entail. If he began now, he'd end up telling Ron about the prophecy. He couldn't risk any more ears catching wind of the prediction. Ron worriedly glanced at his roommate, his tightly crossed arms loosening.

"What?" Harry exhaled audibly, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment.

"Nothing." He settled, swallowing painfully. He did not want to lie to Ron, but he had no choice. "Forget it."

"Why?"

"Pretend this never occurred." The flame-haired boy frowned profoundly.

"Harry..."

"Forget it, okay?" With one last look of worry, Ron reluctantly nodded, turning his attention back on the lecturing divination teacher. The woman droned on in her oscillating tone about tea leaves, while Ella nodded jadedly. Finally, the teacher began to read the redhead's cup, squinting her eyes at the reading. Shaking her head and tsking, Trelawney set the cup down almost amusedly with a dull 'clunk.'

"Good luck with that, dear." She told Ella, turning on her heel back to her previous position. Lifting the abandoned cup in her hands once more, Trelawney's turned back missed Ella's mocking eyebrow raise and unbelievably annoyed look. Lavender and Parvati looked smug, sending each other knowing looks and shaking their heads at their roommate. "Now," Trelawney's somber voice brought attention back to the subject at hand. She had scraped part of the blue flower pattern off of the tea cup with a long fingernail, and stared at the leaves. "The symbol here," she absently gestured, "is quite obviously an auburn moon under the house of Jupiter." A coarse cough broke the hazy silence of the room, and the students set their sights on Professor Sibley, clutching a handkerchief over her mouth. Her face was set with a grim smile, and she waved her kerchief for the scowling Trelawney to proceed. If Harry didn't know better, he'd have guessed that was a cough of contradiction.

"Here we go." Murmured Icarus from the back, shifting his exhausted form in another direction. The divination professor contorted her face in contempt, gripping the cup as if it were the offender.

"And this axe," she stated, staring challengingly at the vacant-expression on Sibley's face, "is indicative of the quick and painless." As she glided over toward the far center of the room, Trelawney's many bangles and beads clacked against each other, making the noise of substandard jewelry grating. Lips pursed in false regret, Trelawney placed the tea cup on the boys' table, jerking Thanos awake. Sliding the cup before its owner, the woman dourly smiled at Harry. He had the strong urge to roll his eyes and waggle his head. Her massive eyes blinked at him and her many necklaces audibly clashed with each other. "Your death will occur when you have gone astray, and the brown moon crosses its father's path; yet, for you, it

will be quick and painless." Harry ignored Ron's blatant 'still-think-she-isn't-nutters' look and instead followed Trelawney's retreating form.

He felt somewhat disappointed with himself now for defending her.

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"Do you think we'll have one?" Ron suddenly asked one day. Harry was occupied with forming different shapes with his dinner rice, and he set his fork down, tilting his head slightly.

"One what?" he questioned the redhead. Ron swirled the gravy and steak bits on his plate, his pink ears peeking from between his locks of hair. Hermione stopped her reading to look at the prefect.

"A...." he mumbled the last words and quickly sipped his pumpkin juice. Hermione and Harry lowered their brows.

"A what?" he asked. Sighing in defeat, Ron grabbed a roll and ripped it into small shreds.

"A dance." He spoke. Harry's dark eyebrows were lost in his fringe as he felt his stomach twist. The last time there was a dance, he was obligated to go, and it wasn't exactly a brilliant time. Dancing with an egocentric Parvati Patil and getting turned down by then-crush Cho Chang was not a time he enjoyed reflecting on. Swiftly downing his goblet of juice in one go, Harry stared wide-eyed at Ron.

"Why do you ask?" Hermione inquired, closing her book and raising an intrigued eyebrow at her cohort. Harry noted Ginny, who was between him and Kaltag, ceased slicing her steak to hear her brother's answer. Musing his hair, Ron swirled the pitcher of pumpkin juice before refilling his goblet and handing the jug to the raven-haired Gryffindor.

"Well," he began, tugging at his striped tie. "We had one for the tournament when Durmstrang and Beauxbatons was here. I just thought they'd have one this year." Nodding, Hermione scraped the seasonings off of her chicken, munching it quietly. Ginny smirked at her brother, leaning on her elbows.

"Eager to put on those dancing shoes, are we?" she taunted. Glaring at Ginny in disgust Ron sipped his drink a bit.

"Not on your life. I was just wondering if I'd ever put that dress robe to good use." Harry thought back to the navy dress robe most likely stuffed in Ron's trunk in the Tower at this moment. Through their first funds, Harry had Fred and George promise to buy their younger brother dress robes to replace the hideous, second-hand maroon ones Mrs. Weasley had chosen. Trivial gesture, true, but at least Ron had one thing Malfoy couldn't hold over his head. Then again, being Malfoy, the Slytherin would certainly find a way to exploit him. Ron's brown eyes swept over the Gryffindors and landed on Starbuck with a half-glare. Turning to Hermione with a grin, Ron folded his hands. "And before anyone else has a chance, Hermione, you're my date."

The bushy-haired witch scoffed in disagreement, dropping her fork and glowering at Ron in disbelief.

"Pardon me?" she began threateningly. "Why do you assume I would go with you, Ronald?" Ginny glanced between the two with a grin and murmured in Harry's ear, "Because he doesn't see any Viktor Krums slinking about, that's why."

"I'm terribly sorry," Ron placed his hand over his heart and scrunched his eyebrows. "I meant, Hermione? Would you do me the honor of going to the ball with me?" Hermione appeared vaguely flattered, yet anger from Ron's earlier insinuation flitted across her features.

"If there is a ball this year," she began in a considering tone. "I'll think about it." Ron appeared somewhat put out by her answer, but quickly masked it with a small grin.

Pushing the shredded dinner roll to the side of his plate, Ron glanced at the bushy-haired prefect and said, "That's all I ask."

Ginny lightened the mood by tell the others about the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend on Halloween.

"It was posted this afternoon, but you didn't come to the tower after class." She stated, sampling the desserts. Harry made a mental note

to inform Sirius in his next letter. Better yet, he'd try to talk to him through the mirror. Hermione nodded, opening her book once more.

"Good," she affirmed. "I'm in need of a few new quills."

"I expect Snuffles'll probably—ow!" Ron grimaced, throwing a glare in Ginny's direction. Harry quirked his jaw at his friend in disappointment. They couldn't risk anyone outside their circle learning about Sirius. It was bad enough he had to lie to Neville about Sirius' sudden appearance at the Department of Mysteries last year.

"Er...I suppose he was...supporting You-Know-Who," Harry told the round-faced Gryffindor fifth year. Neville nodded, twiddling his thumbs in his lap. The stiff white hospital sheet creased slightly over his thighs. Harry's emerald eyes settled for scanning the room and fumbling with the edge of his robes. Neville absently brought a hand up to itch his nose, but sadly set it back in his lap; his nose was heavily bandaged, though Madam Pomfrey gave him a potion for it to heal. When it would kick in, neither boy new.

"By nose," he spoke nasally. "Maddum Bomfrey said it'd dingle. Nudding bad, dough." Harry reluctantly released a small grin and drummed his finger over his thighs. For some reason, he felt heavy apprehension around Neville. Was it guilt? Was it envy?

"Erm, Neville," Harry started. "I guess—well, will you be getting a new wand?" It was a silly question, but Harry felt he had to break the tension, even though it was one-sided. Nodding slowly, Neville tugged his sheets higher over his stomach.

"Ob course," he replied happily. "By grandbother is daking be do Diagon Alley when I ged back." He wrinkled the sheet in his hands. "I deeded a dew one, eddy-way." The Boy-Who-Lived slowly agreed, his mind drifting to the night before. Neville ruffled his hair in a tired fashion, and wiped at his eyes and forehead. Harry narrowed his eyes when his pudgy hands mopped the sweat off his unmarked temple.

It should have been you. Not me.

His scar prickled a bit, and he quickly rubbed it with his right index finger, blinking his eyes to rid himself of resentment. The injured

Gryffindor's eyes were drooping, but he fought the calling of sleep. Sleep, which was never plagued by power-hungry dark wizards. "Get some sleep, Neville. I'll see you, then." Harry stood from his seat, barely acknowledging Neville's appreciative thanks and wishes for a good dream.

You're the only one of us sleeping well tonight, Neville, Harry thought darkly. Normal, empty dreams, for a normal, unburdened boy.

"Shut up!" Ginny hissed in the present. Ron rubbed his shin and pouted, looking guiltily at Harry.

"Oh. Right." He responded, staring at his plate. Luckily, none of the nearby Celestials were paying attention, as Kaltag, Dean, and Starbuck were absorbed in conversation about the weekend. Ron brightened a bit, smiling at the dour-faced Harry. "Quidditch next week. Still upping the practices?"

"It's against Slytherin," Ginny answered in a tone of condescension, spooning some chocolate pudding. "Of course you have to add more practices." Harry pushed his golden plate away and pulled some treacle tart before him.

"Both teams are doing incredibly well," he began. "We'll just add one more practice this week. I think we've done all we practically can. Don't you Ron?" The prefect nodded resolutely, pulling a tart toward him.

"Yes," he declared. "One more practice would do us well."

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Ron made a face and shoved the box near Ginny, eyeing it warily. The youngest Weasley exclaimed in surprise and kicked the box back at Ron.

"I don't want it!" he cried, pushing it away again.

"And neither do I." Ginny countered, edging away from the box. Her brother raised his eyebrow and crossed his arms, staring sardonically at his sister occupying the armchair covered in O.W.L. study books.



"Why wouldn't you?" he retorted. "You're starting to take after them, aren't you?" Ginny scowled and flipped a page in her thick Potions book.

"I'm not stupid enough to eat any of their creations, Ron." She jeered, before her tone softened into one of boredom. "Besides, it's for you and Harry, not me." The Gryffindor keeper grimaced, moving to sit at the assembled chessboard.

"They're a bit late on the congratulations, anyway." He grumbled. Starbuck closed his book and sat across from Ron to play black in the game.

"Better late than never." Ginny pointed out.

"In this case, I'll make an exception." Ron directed uneasily, ordering a pawn to move. "Should've chosen 'never.'" Fred and George, in an effort to congratulate the sixth years on becoming co-captains, sent them a box full of a new line of their sweets and gags. Unwilling to open the box, the boys only read their short note listing what was provided.

Toddler Tarts—which turned the consumer into a hyperactive toddler for ten minutes—Smoking Strudels, which issued smoke out of every visible facial hole in one's body for quite some time; Cinna-Mole Buns (where the eater's face breaks out in throbbing, pus-filled moles for an hour) and Fudge Firecrackers (Harry blushed a deep shade of crimson when he read they exploded animal waste) were the last items, and ever courteous Fred and George provided them with enough items to bring two houses to their knees.

"Hermione'll have a fit," Harry reminded, absently doodling on his parchment. "If she sees this box." Ron had already butchered seven of Starbuck's pieces, and nodded grimly. "Guess we should hide it." With a mischievous smile, Ginny tucked a loose strand behind her ear.

"Good luck." She provided with a falsely sweet voice. Rolling his eyes, Harry shut his books and placed his parchment aside and stood, pointing his wand at the box.

"I'll hide it in the dormitory." Muttering the levitation spell, the box hovered, moving toward the steps by Harry's guiding wand. He needed to write or talk to Sirius anyway, so he figured it was best to get it over with. Not many occupied the tower this afternoon, as the golden sun set nicely today, and the grounds were chilled to perfection. Taking the steps one-by-one and hovering the box, Harry ascended, just as he heard Ron state, "Checkmate."

The sixth year boys' dormitory was void of any wizards or Celestials, so it was safe. Harry hovered the box in an absent corner, where one dusty, abandoned trunk lay. Tucking his wand back in his pocket, the green-eyed boy opened his trunk, rummaging through the pile of books and clothing for his object. Grazing the crinkled paper, Harry pulled out the mirror, looking at his dappled reflection. Settling in his four-poster, Harry blew at a lock of hair on his forehead and clearly stated, "Sirius Black."

A dark fog rolled across the mirror's reflection, swirling ominously and unsettlingly. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his bed, creasing his brows in worry. Seconds later, a bright-faced Sirius Black was grinning charmingly at him, surrounded by blinding white.

"Harry," Sirius stated. "Good to see you! Been a while, eh?" Smiling at his godfather, Harry felt warmth inhabit his abdomen.

"A few months, yes." He replied, narrowing his eyes at his godfather's location. "Where are you?" Harry thought Sirius' eyes oddly flashed a bit, and his face twitched, but blamed it on the light streaming into his room.

"On...a mission." He replied, beaming in reassurance. "Quite bright, isn't it?"

"Very." The dark-haired teenager admitted with a nod. "Er, how's Remus?"

"Well," the innocent Animagus answered. "Very well. You've made friends?"

"Good ones. One would almost say they're like brothers." Harry scrunched his face at his words, rethinking them. "Well, they are brothers. But we're—oh, we're close friends."

"Excellent."

"I wanted to let you know there's a Hogsmeade visit on Halloween," Harry informed, rubbing his leg with his trainer. Nodding in acceptance, Sirius worried his lip between his teeth before breaking into a smile.

"Perhaps a visit is in order." Harry lowered his brows, his eyes searching his burgundy hangings before roosting on his godfather.

"Are you sure?" he questioned. "The place'll be swarming with students, professors, and Celestials. You don't need that." Sirius dismissed him with a look.

"Not to worry." He assured. As much as Harry wanted to see the innocent convict, he couldn't risk the man's safety.

"Voldemort knows you're an Animagus," he pointed out in a low voice. "And Malfoy knows your form. They've probably got spies everywhere." The goateed male lowered his thick brows in a deep frown, appraising his godson.

"You're starting to sound like Molly and Remus." He commented in disapproval.

"At least not like Snape." Harry put in, failing to break a grin on the man's gaunt face. Sighing, Harry rubbed his temple with a free hand. "I just don't want you to get caught. You've many near misses because of me already." And nearly died in all of them, the boy thought dismally. There was a loud bang emitting from the mirror, which made the thin man turn around quickly.

"It's not your fault I nearly get caught. I'm not nearly as good at stealth as Moody. But I've got to go, Harry." Sirius stated hastily. "We'll talk again later, eh?" With Harry's final nod, the mirror went back to the teenager's reflection. Heaving a difficult breath, Harry tucked the mirror into his robe and scooted off of his bed. His conversation with Sirius made him reminisce about his third and fifth year, where the man narrowly escaped death both times. Glumly exiting the dormitory, Harry descended the stone steps heavily. The common room had more students than ten minutes ago, all taking refuge at a table. Ron and Starbuck were still playing chess, Ron still winning by quite a bit. Starbuck was chewing on his fingers,

eyeing his next move carefully, while Ron was hunched forward over his many captured pieces. Ginny was still in her chair, jotting notes down. Feeling the need to be alone, Harry silently slunk out of the portrait hole without them noticing and walked down the corridor.

He didn't care where he was going. He just didn't want his friends hanging around him. After all, death was his shadow. His parents, Cedric, every casualty in this war and the one before his parents' death. Him.

Students passed him by with a polite grin, girls quietly squealing to their friends that they had just smiled at the Harry Potter. Harry found himself envious even of those shrieking girls. At least they never had to look constantly over their shoulders, or duel with dark lords. They'd be lucky if they dueled with another student.

Wandering farther and farther away from Gryffindor Tower, Harry spotted dark shapes, and a dark head of grease ahead, along with another dark, yet greaseless mane beside him. Both men wore scowling faces, and their dark eyes glared down every one younger than them, but spoke to each other civilly. Upon closer inspection, Harry recognized the greasy-haired one as Snape, and the other as History of Celestia professor and Aves Head of House, Professor Perseus Einar. Taking a quick detour, Harry headed down another, fuller corridor.

Harry felt a glorious heat land on his face, and realized that he absentmindedly ambled outside. There were still many students by the lake and around the front steps, watching as the sun disappeared behind the mountains. As a chilling wind blew, Harry bundled his robes about him, reminding himself that it was mid-October. Walking down the stairs, Harry avoided eye contact with many of his peers, wondering where he could go. He didn't want to be in the common room, now that it was steadily gaining students, and he did not feel like joining Hermione and Nikola in the library. As a white, billowing sign from above, Harry smiled when he spotted smoke issuing from Hagrid's chimney.

It had decidedly been a while since he visited Hagrid for leisure. The only time he and the others saw the half-giant was during their N.E.W.T. Care of Magical Creatures class. The green-eyed teenager suddenly felt a pang of guilt, having not visited the man

more often. But who could blame him with all of the Quidditch, the Defense Association, homework and studying?

The young man could finally make out the scrubbed front door and the buckets littering the knot-grassy area. The weathered wood and brick that make the house were a comforting sight. Knocking on the thick door with hard raps, Harry stood on the steps, his hands tucked into his robes. He almost laughed fancifully at hearing the muffled, yet booming barks of Fang the boarhound, and Hagrid commanding the beast to stay down. When the door swung open, the friendly, bearded face of Hagrid met Harry's eyes.

"Harry!" Hagrid exclaimed in vast relish. "What're you doin' 'ere?" Smiling with delighted sarcasm, Harry responded, "It's good to see you too, Hagrid."

"Oh, come in, come in." Hagrid's frying pan-sized hand slapped Harry into the hut, missing the wince from the younger boy. Stumbling into the nearest large chair, Harry nudged the drooling Fang away and watched as Hagrid bustled about the small cabin kitchen. "Tea? How bou' some muffins? Jus' baked 'em not too long ago." Remembering how atrocious Hagrid's culinary skills were, Harry gripped the hem of his robe and shook his head.

"Tea sounds fine, Hagrid. Dinner is soon." The large man nodded in understanding.

"Righ', righ'. Can' spoil yer appetite, now, can' we?" Hagrid's cauldron whistled loudly, and the professor poured the hot water into mugs the size of large cereal bowls. Seizing both cups, Hagrid handed one carefully to Harry and shooed Fang out of his other chair. "How're yer classes so far, Harry?" Cautiously sipping the scalding liquid, Harry hissed quietly at the burning in his mouth, and blew on the tea.

"Fine," he replied dryly. "All right, I guess." Agreeing, Hagrid down most of his tea, his cheeks and bulbous nose reddening beneath the mess of tangled hair and beard. Rubbing a spot on his mug, Harry chewed his lip and mulled over the silence.

"Professor Lykaios is good, is he?" Harry referred to the Olympic Beasts instructor, Xylon Lykaios, a man with wild, salt and pepper hair, and dark blue eyes assisting Hagrid with teaching. The scars

riddling the man's face only served to let others assume his fondness for wild creatures. He and Hagrid went hand in hand.

"Yeh," Hagrid spoke. "Wen' out inta th' fores', ta capture sum Jarveys fer nex' class. Knows his beasts, he does." Harry sipped some tea and folded his legs complacently. Fang sniffed the air and settled his massive head back down, falling back to rest.

"How's Grawp?" This was the right thing to say, as the creature-lover's black eyes twinkled madly at the mention of his brother.

"Grawpie's all righ'," he answered adjusting himself in his seat. "Had a spo' o' trouble earlier with th' centaurs, but ev'rything is settled fer now. He's learned quite a bit o' English."

"Has he?" Harry replied somewhat wryly. Wonder if he's still on about 'Hermy,' the black-haired teenager reflected, thinking about Grawp's fond nickname for Hermione.

"Oh, he has." Hagrid drank the rest of his tea while Harry merely sipped the hot drink. "Hermi'ne? An' Ron?" Alive and well, grasping at each other's throats occasionally, Harry thought.

"Good." He answered. "Hanging out with the Celestials at the moment."

"Mm, ah see you've made quite a bit o' friends, Harry."

"And just as many enemies." Harry swilled his tea before Hagrid could reply.

"Ah, with new begin'nin's comes new challenges." he philosophized. Harry raised his brows in mild amazement. He was waiting for Hagrid to mumble something along the lines of, "great man, Dumbledore. Words ar' enlight'ning," but the man said nothing.

"With a new Gryffindor comes an annoying Slytherin, then?" Hagrid's eyes reflected perplexity, before Harry made out a smile under his mass of twisted hair.

"Sump'in like that, righ'." He answered.

ooooo

Harry and Hagrid spoke for a while before Harry headed back to the castle for dinner. He had to admit; it felt good to talk to Hagrid. The gentle half-giant was always simple, not complex as many so often were. A dampened roar of sound met Harry's ears as he neared the castle, watching as students from every house poured into the great hall for supper.

His stomach rumbled with hunger, desperate to satisfy itself with anything. Harry was frightened to realize that even Fred and George's concoctions were starting to sound appetizing. Just as he tagged behind a few Voltaire fifth years to enter the dining hall, he was disheartened to hear a voice.

"Harry." A familiar voice summoned. Abruptly pausing, Harry narrowed his eyes slightly at the well-known voice. Spinning around with a charitable grin, his arms loosely crossed, the black-haired teenager faced his caller.

"Cho." The Asian Ravenclaw's cheeks blushed a brilliant shade of rose, and she wrung her hands before her nervously. Harry noted her other half missing. It was hardly one without the other—ever, with the exception of classes. "Where's Michael?" The girl tightened her lips slightly, tensing her hands.

"He's...on his way." Harry inclined his head indifferently. "How have you been?"

"Great," Harry admitted truthfully. "It's been a good year so far."

"Yeah, you're a brilliant defense instructor." Cho complimented.

"Thanks." There was an onrush of students and Cho drifted closer to Harry, making him feel somewhat ill at ease. He could make out the tiny gold streaks in Cho's bright, brown eyes, wide with wonder and...desire? "Er..."

"You've seen the announcements, right?" she queried, twirling a raven lock of hair between her fingers.

"Announcements...?"

"About the dance," she enlightened. "Everyone's talking about it." Harry snorted elegantly.

"Not in Gryffindor." He countered. "I would've seen it. Or Ginny or Hermione would have told me." The seeker was taken aback by the sudden hardness in the Asian witch's eyes. Her eyes squinted slightly, and her smile was more cold, and calculating.

"They would, would they?" her tone was somewhat acerbic, and slightly harsher than her normal pleasing voice. The boy suddenly longed for his seat in the great hall, hoping to escape the coldness radiating off the witch. He was never uncomfortable with Cho since she and Michael were together. Now...now, the girl was...well, he couldn't describe her. "Does she tell you everything, Harry?" The boy in question narrowed his eyes, flicking them behind the girl and back.

"Here's your boyfriend, Cho." He stated. The seventh year's eyes widened and she swiftly took a step back from invading Harry's space to smile winningly at her boyfriend. Michael nodded to Harry in acknowledgement, and dragged his girlfriend by the hand into the dining hall. Scoffing to himself, Harry turned to enter the hall when he was interrupted again.

"Harry!" his face lit in a true smile as Ginny Weasley strode up to him with a lively smile. "Where've you been?" The seeker and the chaser entered the raucous hall, maneuvering through the many bodies.

"Hagrid's." he stated shortly. Beaming, Ginny and Harry found their regular seats and began piling food onto their plates. Hermione and Ron weren't present.

"Did you hear about the dance?" she questioned, pulling a chicken breast on her plate. Harry thought Ginny held a look of anticipation on her features, but brushed it off as hunger.

"Vaguely," he responded darkly, forking a leg onto his salver. "Just that there is one."

"Halloween Ball," she recited. "Costumes are optional. Halloween night in the Great Hall." Harry crinkled his eyebrows at the notice.



"What kind of Halloween Ball has an optional costume pronouncement?" Ginny lifted a sculpted brow and eyed the sixth year.

"I assume you'll be wearing one."

"I didn't say that." She prodded him in the ribs lightly with a finger.

"See?" she declared. "That statement is for people like you."

"So you'll be wearing a costume?" he raised his brow cynically.

"No." she replied in an earnest tone.

"Thought so."

ooooo

The upcoming Halloween Ball was the main topic of conversation in every class, corridor, and clique. Many were figuring out costumes to where, while others were seething that they weren't given enough notice. Professors had taken to chopping of points every time a student was concentration on the dance, rather than their work. The only ones not following their colleagues' footsteps were Professors Kenward and Jace. Kenward gave mere verbal warnings, which immediately quieted the jabbering pupil; Jace, on the other hand, seemed to encourage talk about the dance, adding his input and making the potions master furious.

Hermione and Ron were a bit put out that Harry had gone to visit Hagrid without them, but Harry couldn't bring himself to be concerned. There were times when it just needed to be him alone, without his best friends dropping everything to tag along. He scraped the dry tip of his quill across the grainy parchment in Defense, listening to Kenward explain an interesting spell.

"Now, then," the professor continued. "You've heard of many shield spells from your previous instructors, as well as which spells they protect against." Kenward sat on the edge of his large desk, one leg dangling idly, while his arm was propped up against the other. He looked very laid back in his navy and light blue professional attire, and his indigo tie hung loosely around his neck, revealing part of his gold chain. "These shields—if done correctly—keep you out of

harms way, and require some concentration. There is one spell, however, that shields you in a different way. It is very effective, very impressive."

Harry perked at the knowledge of such a powerful spell. It may not be able to defend him against the Killing Curse, but it could thwart other dangerous spells. Many chairs grated against the stone floor as students became more alert. Kenward smiled, a sad, apologetic smile, and let his other leg join the hanging one. "Yet, so much meditation and magical strength it requires, a handful of wizards and witches can utilize it.

"The Barter Hex—known to the elders as the Inflection Curse—physically changes the position between two duelers. This helps greatly when the opposition sends a curse in your direction." Kenward nimbly leapt off his desk and folded his arms. "If they send a Cruciatus Curse in your direction, you incant the spell, and seconds later, your foe finds themselves in the path of their own Cruciatus Curse." Harry frowned; he didn't have to eye Kaltag, Ron, or any of the other students in the class to know they felt the same way. As if the man knew what Harry was thinking, Kenward grinned, pacing slowly before his desk.

"This curse is on your N.E.W.T. exam," he stated. "So it is required of me to teach it, though none of you in this room can execute it." Hermione appeared crestfallen, realization that this was a spell even she couldn't perform hitting her like a crazed Hebridean Black dragon. "In this spell, timing is everything. As soon as the opponent begins to speak his or her curse, you'd focus on this spell. Of course, it takes an obscene amount of concentration; this spell is sort of like apparating, due to heavy deliberation. Although, with the Barter Hex, you won't have the bothersome worry of splinching yourself." The professor's tone was one of dry amusement, earning many grimaces from around the room, especially from the Hufflepuffs.

Beside him, Ron was red with despair, since he took in that only a select few can perform the spell. Kaltag appeared disconsolate; even he hoped to do this hex. Both boys wretchedly toyed with their quills, Ron heaving a sigh.

"At least no one can do it," he reminded in a whisper. "That's better than having Malfoy gloat." Kenward rolled his cobalt sleeves up his arms and loosened his sapphire tie further. Narrowing his eyes

slightly, Harry could see a very soft, ethereal amber glow coming from the edge of his open shirt. Cocking his head to the side, he could faintly see the shape of a thin, ocher cylinder hiding behind the navy tie.

"The incantation is 'Infectolocus.' You must close your eyes, and clear your mind, thinking of nothing but altering your positions." Kenward explained, pulling out his own slender wand. "Everyone, close your eyes..." he ordered. Harry furrowed his brows, and shut his eyes, keeping a firm grip on his wand. "Now, clear your mind. Keep it void of any hindrance, rid yourself of all stray thoughts." The instructor's soft, mellifluous voice stated. The raven-haired male squeezed his shut eyes in annoyance at hearing a scoff from the Slytherin and Aves area. No doubt Xenik or Malfoy thought this exercise was pointless.

It reminded Harry uncomfortably of Occlumency, clearing his mind and shutting out his thoughts. Maybe if he'd only master it...Perhaps Kenward was a master Occlumens? The seeker believed he would be a much better teacher than the sour potions professor.

"Just picture your opponent, wand brandished, a curse on the tip of his tongue," the man's voice drifted into Harry's blank thoughts. "And imagine that curse, a deadly red color, speeding towards you—right at your heart..." Harry pictured dueling with a Death Eater (who was strangely plump like Pettigrew). An ominous jet of red light sliced through the air, death and torture written in its crimson tendrils. He could feel the sweat seeping from his hairline. "...and you think of a disruption of time and space. Changing positions, switching places..." Suddenly, the image faded and Harry found himself behind the bright curse of death. Pettigrew fell to the ground, twitching madly, before stopping. Harry heard Ron make a small noise of triumph on his left.

"Repeat after me." The Defense instructor's far off voice commanded. "Infectolocus..." The room resounded with soft incantations, with no produced results. "Open your eyes." The Gryffindor obeyed, gauging Kenward's relaxed face. The necklace glowed softly beneath his garments, depicting the soft, leisurely persona of the older man. "Very good. It's a shame not many can do such a beneficial spell. It would no doubt be a piece of good fortune and a blight to the magical world." The lightly bearded professor

flicked his wand absently at the air before him, tucking the wand in his pocket and leaning on the edge of his desk. "Just for enjoyment's sake, would anyone like to try the Barter Hex?"

"Right," Harry heard Zacharias Smith say. "Have you hex us instead when we can't defend ourselves with this illusory spell?"

"Idiot." Ron muttered. Kenward wasn't daunted in the least, but he only elevated a bushy, tawny brow.

"Our first volunteer, Mr. Smith." He announced. Many students snickered at the Hufflepuff's ashen and vacant countenance. Ron smirked jubilantly, and Kaltag jolted Harry in his side with a rounded elbow. Nikola and Endymion looked upon the boy with slight sympathy. "Mr. Smith?" Zacharias shakily stood, inching toward the front of the classroom. Kenward displayed a sort of predatory grin as the boy stepped on the dais. They assumed the positions, while Kenward instructed the Hufflepuff to follow through with the Barter Hex. Zacharias fell silent for a few moments, his wand in his trembling hand. With a weak Bruising Hex, Zacharias was down, rubbing his arm with a scowl.

"Hmph." Ron stifled his snigger. "Hasn't he learned his lesson yet?" The professor extended a hand to Zacharias, mumbling the countercurse for the hex.

"Better luck next time, Mr. Smith." Zacharias staggered to his desk with his head down. "Anyone else?" Starbuck, Stavros, Tam, Seamus, and a few more students attempted, but, as the teacher declared, none of them could manage it. Harry could hear Zacharias grumbling to himself in the back, and shredding parchment. Malfoy, in his hauteur and superciliousness, took the platform, only to gain a face full of acne. He had left the platform in huff before Kenward could retract the spell. "Any more takers?" The Gryffindor sixth year chewed his lip in thought, reflecting on all of those who went against the professor. Nearly half the class challenged the professor, including Malfoy. What did he have to lose? Ron started when Harry raised his hand.

"I'll try, sir." The redhead stared wide-eyed at his best mate, a look of disbelief crossing his features.

"Are you mad, Harry?" he whispered frantically. "You'll get jinxed!"

"And he'll fix it," Harry murmured back. "Besides, no one can do the spell."

"True." Kaltag added, twirling his wand between his fingers.

"Mr. Potter?" Kenward called. Nodding quickly, Harry pushed out his chair and stepped toward the dais. Hermione gave him a feeble nod of encouragement and he inclined his head. Kenward stood, as if already contemplating his defeat, his wand between his two hands. His necklace's glow seemed to brighten a bit as Kenward took his position opposite Harry. "Just like we practiced." He reminded. Bobbing his head in verification, Harry closed his eyes, clearing his mind. A warm blankness engulfed his senses, and he felt his wand hand drift before him, his trusty weapon firm in his grip, aimed at his opponent. The once audible rips of parchment in the back were dulled until they couldn't be heard, and Harry waited for the spell. The air entering his body was tight and agitated, but he wasn't focusing on breathing. In his mind's eye, he pictured Kenward's glinting eyes, wand pointed directly at his heart, and his necklace's soft, calming glow.

"Oculocaecus!"

"Inflectolocus!"

Suddenly, chilled air was rushing around his body, and the air in his lungs became tight. There was a rush of sound and a stultified ringing in his ears; he felt slightly drained, but he held his wand securely in his right hand. His mind clicked into reality, and Harry narrowed his closed eyes. Did Kenward cancel the spell or something? Was this some kind of test? Allowing his emerald eyes to survey the issue, Harry's orbs widened.

He wasn't next to his table, near Ron or Kaltag anymore.

He was at the other end of the platform.

Where Kenward was standing.

Several gasps and whispers tuned louder in his ears, and he finally met the broadened eyes of his peers. Hermione stared at him in utter shock, while Ron's mouth was hanging open. Quickly diverting

his gaze, Harry noticed Kenward was still standing, his wand locked on Harry, but his eyes oddly searching the sixteen year old. Lowering his wand hurriedly, Harry kept his gaze on the platform beneath his shoes and felt his cheeks redden. Snapping out of his stupor, Kenward tucked his wand back in his pocket, facing the class.

"Two parchments on the Barter Hex, due by next class. Dismissed." Students swiftly packed up their things, throwing Harry curious glances. The Gryffindor hopped of the dais in dire need to separate himself and his professor, and ignored the furtive looks from his friends. Kaltag was very silent, stuffing books in his sack, while Ron opened his mouth to speak several times, but busied himself with packing. As the room emptied out, Harry swung his bag over his shoulder, ready to leave. "Mr. Potter?" The boy in question closed his eyes in defeat, then turned to face the anxious façade of Professor Kenward. "Please stay behind." Hermione, Ron and Kaltag, already up the aisle, caught his eye. Ella Burton gave him a peculiar look before following a few Brittlebores out of the room.

"Harry?" Hermione queried, clutching her books protectively.

"I'll meet you all later." Hesitantly agreeing, the three left the room, the heavy door slamming shut behind them. Never had such silence unnerved Harry before. He couldn't hear the bustle of the crowd outside the door, of the students heading to their next class. He could have used that comfort at the moment. He spun around reluctantly to face Kenward, who was leaning against the boys' desk. Gripping his bag in his white-knuckled fist, Harry's green eyes darted everywhere but Kenward.

"Very impressive, Harry." The man complimented with a warm smile. "You're the seventh person in the world to perform this spell perfectly." Harry exhaled a breath in annoyance.

"Great." His tone was more sarcastic than ecstatic, making Kenward eye him strangely. "Sorry, it's just..." Harry couldn't find the words to tell this virtual stranger his deepest desire. The man nodded anyway, crossing his arms. The teenager's eyes took in the relaxed, contemplative stance of his professor, understanding and supportive. "Can you...do the spell?" The elder male nodded, somewhat reluctantly. "Can Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"No, I'm afraid not even the legendary Albus Dumbledore can manage this spell." Kenward revealed with slight humor. "I believe it's why he's taken up apparating." Harry felt his eyes widen and his jaw slacken a bit. Dumbledore was the first person came across his thoughts at being able to do this spell. The student felt an odd pang of pride that he could do one thing the old headmaster couldn't. A warm, weighty hand landed on his shoulder, and he found himself locked on Kenward's intense gaze. "Not everyone is perfect, Mr. Potter. The headmaster, illustrious though he is, cannot do everything the world expects of him. It's the price we pay for being human."

"Price of being normal." Raising an eyebrow, Kenward rolled down his shirt sleeves, and adjusted his vest. The oddest thing was his necklace. What was once a healthy yellow glow, was now a serene cerulean blush.

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Early Saturday morning light poured through the dormitory window, breaking through the crevices of Harry's thick four-poster hangings. He didn't know the exact time, but he knew it was still an ungodly hour to be awake. If the loud rummaging in the corner wasn't as loud, he'd be able to get back to bed. Groaning, the dark-haired boy kicked off his blanket and grudgingly pushed the curtains aside. He blinked away the intensity of brightness, allowing his eyes to get used to it. Everything around him was a blur of white, red and brown, as his glasses were still on the night table. The loud clattering of objects aggravated his hearing; a blurry form stood hunched over a tanned shape, sifting through something. Said hazy figure's vibrant hair gave him away.

"Ron?" Harry whispered. "What are you doing?" Stretching his thin arms, Harry finally sought out his glasses and carefully placed them on his nose, squinting at the now definite form of Ron. The prefect had been poking around the box of Fred and George's gags, obviously searching for something.

"I think I dropped my prefect badge in here," he claimed, sorting through the risky pastries and items with delicate care. "And I don't want Hermione flipping out on me." Scanning the room to see if the keeper had awoken the others, Harry was surprised to find Dean

and Kaltag's beds empty. As he didn't have a watch yet, Harry could only guess it was almost or after seven in the morning.

"Where are they?" the Weasley prefect pushed the box back in the corner and wiped his hands on his trousers.

"They went to the pitch," he informed. "Something about a ball with a foot." It took Harry a moment to realize Ron was referring to the Muggle sport of football. The prefect also looked confused, before Harry eased himself out of bed and began to throw on a sweater and Dudley's worn, faded jeans. Slipping his wand in the back pocket, Harry piled his sheets on his bed in a jumbled fashion and yawned. Breakfast wasn't served until eight or nine.

"Let's go." He instructed Ron. The baffled Gryffindor eyed his friend warily, shooting glances at the shuddering hangings of their dorm mates.

"To the pitch to see the ball with the foot?" he asked. "Never saw that before."

"Football, Ron." Harry corrected, opening the door to the stairs. "Muggles call it football."

"Oh. Does it—"

"No, it doesn't have a foot." Harry cut off. The two quietly made it down the stairs and through the empty common room out into the corridor. The Fat Lady puffed angrily, glowering at the two and mumbling about the second time she was shaken from her rest. The boys walked in relative silence, Ron toying with his navy sweater, and Harry studying the various paintings he ignored for five years snoozing along the wall. He knew he had been distancing himself from both his best friends in the last week, and he felt deeply at fault. At times he found himself walking to classes alone, or staying in the library without a companion. It wasn't that he didn't like being with them; he felt as if he didn't fit in anymore.

"So..." Ron began, anxiety present in his voice. "Is football a popular Muggle sport?"



"Yes." Harry answered, studying his short fingernails. "It's played very often. Haven't you heard Dean ramble about it for the last five years?" Chuckling, Ron tugged his wide sleeves up.

"Quidditch is the only sport that reaches my ears." The two continued their trek, stopping to wait for a staircase to bridge their landings. The sun was covered by thick clouds, painting the lush lawn in bright, pale light. Fresh morning dew clung to the sharp blades of grass, moistening both boys' trainers. Their shoes squeaked the entire length to the two small figures kicking a black and white ball between them.

"Is that it?" Harry heard Ron ask, his own eyes narrowed at the ball being knocked around. "You...kick the ball?"

"With your foot," Harry pointed out amusedly. Ron frowned at him and the two ascended the slight slope up the knoll to the vast pitch. Kaltag and Dean came into sharp focus, as the sweater and jeans clad Paradors executed fancy tricks and moves with the ball. As Dean booted the ball at the Being's chest, he noticed the new visitors.

"Morning, then." He greeted. Kaltag punted the sphere at the Gryffindor, who head-butted the ball back. The exchange was remarkable. "We've even for a game, Tag." He stated, knocking the ball with his chest. Ron's eyes never left the ball, watching in fascination as the two performed a weird dance of skill.

"If you want to play." Kaltag balanced the ball on his right metatarsal, flinging it to the Gryffindor. Dean dribbled it on his thighs, returning it.

"Is that...what it is?" Ron queried looking uneasily at the ball dancing between the two boys.

"Well, you put it through goals," as Ron's eyes flicked to the fifty foot Quidditch hoops, Kaltag added, "on the ground."

"I'm up for it." The redhead supplied. Eyeing the Weasley skeptically, Harry conceded. Letting the ball bounce to the grass below, Dean nodded, pulling out his wand.

"I read a spell about making goals. I'll start on it." He ran off, leaving the three friends alone. Kaltag scooped the ball up with his foot,

kicking it for balance. The edge of his jeans were darker, soaking through with moisture, but he hadn't broken out in a sweat. It was still cool as it was mid-October.

"How long have you played?" Ron asked, bending to tie his shoelace. Not breaking his determined concentration, Kaltag exhaled deeply while switching the ball to the other foot.

"For a while. Since I was four." Harry furrowed his brows, hugging his arms from the cold wind that swept through.

"I thought you were born on Olympus. A full fledged Celestial, living there." A throaty chortle and a grunt emitted from the spiky-haired boy.

"I was born on Olympus." He confirmed. "But I never said I lived there." Steadying the ball one last time, Kaltag let it fall to the soft grass. He placed his hands on his hips, staring at the ball and panting lightly. When he looked between his friends, Harry noticed his face looked wearier, and more grave than normal. He recognized that look, all right. He wore it practically every day.

The look of burden.

"I've never actually seen Olympus, aside from Aristedes Square, and the Fortress of Elysium." he started, tapping the ball with his shoe. The Gryffindors were familiar with stories about the shopping area and the Celestial equivalent of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. "In fact, I never even knew about Olympus until the day before I received my acceptance letter. Starbuck, Nikola and I, you see, were raised as Muggles until we attended Aripedes." Harry creased his eyebrows and studied the forlorn-looking boy.

"You had no idea?" Ron questioned, looking sympathetic. Kaltag shook his head.

"When we were children," his azure eyes flashed in reminiscence. "Mere toddlers, this—this madman threatened to murder us, and our father. He was obsessed with my mother, infatuated with her. So when she refused to return the feeling, he tried in every way to destroy us. For the safety of our lives, my grandparents moved us to Greece." Kaltag paused to roll his silver chain between his fingers and stare across the field. "And wipe all memories we had of the

Celestial world." The best friends' eyes widened, and they flicked over to catch each others' eyes for a second. Harry had come close to losing a fair amount of his memories in second year. That was nothing compared to Kaltag's ordeal. Sure, Harry barely remembered his parents. But at least Kaltag had one during this time.

"So you didn't remember anyone?"

"Not even my mother." He whispered, rolling a reddish-black gem between his thumb and index finger. The small sphere swirled the colors, attached to his platinum chain. The black-haired teen noted Ron's throat bob as he swallowed, an expression of astonishment on his face. "None of us remembered anything. And we still don't."

"How did you find out?" Kaltag released a dry laugh, kicking the ball a few feet away.

"He told us." He spoke cryptically. "He had to. These things..." he broke his stony gaze away from Dean attempting to construct poles. "...they weren't normal." Harry still had an inkling that Kaltag still hadn't entirely forgiven his father. Rubbing his arms, Harry sniffed at the air.

"What things?" Kaltag's eyes returned to Dean flailing his wand at the ground.

"From what I've heard, Nikola was upset with her track and field standings and punched a wall. Lucky she was alone at the time." A hint of a smile twitched at the teen's lips. "And it came crashing down. Thirty foot, twelve inch thick wall, now dust by her anger." Ron gulped quirking his red lips at the image. "Starbuck was in history, taking an exam. And he thought he was going bonkers. He started hearing things in his head. Thoughts, jumbled and overlapping each other. He tore out of the class when he couldn't handle it."

"And you?"

"Me? I fried sixty-two computers in the technology lab. Through my force of lightning, I shorted all but two of them." He confessed, wiping at his nose. "By the time we got home, father already figured it out. But he wanted us to piece it all together." Understanding,

Harry and Ron scuffed at the grass below their shoes. In a swift motion, Ron's head flew up.

"Hang on," he initiated. "How come you didn't have use of accidental force at a younger age?" Harry had to agree. Even before Hogwarts, he had shown many forms of magic, even if he didn't know what it was at the time.

"One of the most powerful Entities of the time bound our forces." The Being answered. "And when she was killed, her constraint was lifted."

"So you get to see your mother often, then?" Ron asked.

"I wish." Kaltag gave a mirthless snicker. "The last time I saw her was when I was thirteen. And even that was a five-minute visit. We still can't see each other." Harry lowered his eyebrows, his green eyes intense.

"You mean that lunatic is still after you?"

"Always." He replied in a lifeless tone. "Like my own shadow."

Death is my shadow....

Harry mulled over his earlier words and thoughts in the last month. It seemed he was wrong about Kaltag. The boy did have a reason to be burdened. He opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted.

"Oy!" The three turned to face four recognizable striding blurs. Icarus, Yorick, Starbuck, and Thanos approached the others, clad in shirts, denim trousers, and trainers, eyeing the ball a few feet away from them. "You're playing football and you didn't invite us?" Icarus crossed his arms and pretended to look hurt.

"Well, you can now," Dean stated, running up to them. "Goals are finished. We can play." Yorick ran a hand through his unruly curly hair and Thanos yawned.

"Ron and I will be goal tenders?" Starbuck questioned. The redheaded keeper looked at Harry in question, wondering what he was getting himself into.

"It's just a keeper position, Ron," he clarified, scratching his messy, black hair. "Defend the goal and send the ball back out on the field." Nodding in discernment, Ron stood between the spacious sort of pipes Dean conjured, studying them interestedly. There was no net to capture the ball, so Ron most likely had to go at great lengths to shield the area. Dean had made another goalpost halfway up the pitch, since it would undoubtedly be tiring to run the full length.

"I call Harry and Dean on my team." Kaltag declared, kicking the back between his legs.

"My side's fine." Icarus stated, gesturing to his group. Starbuck jogged to the other goal, rolling up his sleeves and pant legs when he was settled. A feeling of anxiety swayed in his stomach, as Harry hadn't played the game in years. If these guys were familiar with the sport, he'd have a tough time just handling the ball. He knew seeking, not goal-making. The two teams took to the center of the field, Kaltag passing the ball to Dean. Thanos distended his arms and legs, cracking them audibly. Yorick simply yawned, itching his stomach.

"Let's get this out 'fore breakfast, lads." he requested. Positioning the ball amid the teams, Kaltag and Icarus decided on how they would start. Harry, nervous about the game, decided to follow Thanos' lead and stretch his limbs. At least it would seem a bit intimidating. Just as he began broadening his legs, both paraffin prefects returned to their teams and began a countdown. Moments later, Dean had taken control of the ball and the Gryffindor found himself running alongside his friends. Yorick tried to block the Black Gryffindor as he advanced on Starbuck's goal, while Icarus helped him. Thanos was busy blocking Kaltag, leaving Harry in the clear. In one quick glance, Dean spotted the open Harry, and kicked the ball to him.

Screaming at his legs to work, the teenager's feet met the black and white ball, driving it down the lawn toward the goal. Yorick and Icarus were racing toward him at a rapid pace. Knocking the ball a bit farther from them, Harry decided it was now or never. Punting the ball as hard as he could at the goal, the Gryffindor dodged the Paraffin orbers' tackle and watched as the gray blur sailed between Starbuck and the post. Raising their hands in triumph, Dean and Kaltag cheered, slapping the teen on his back and extolling him. The

celebration was short lived as Starbuck launched the ball out, and Icarus had taken control of it.

The Celestial prefect used some fancy footwork to pass the ball between his less-than-adept partners, and loomed at Ron's goal. Harry, shielding Yorick from receiving the ball, observed as Ron hopped around the goal, eyeing the progress of the ball like a hawk. When Icarus finally did kick the ball at him, Ron successfully blocked it, tossing it out at the others. Sighing in windedness, Harry sprinted back up the field as Kaltag head-butted the ball to him.

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And for once, out of his six years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry Potter, Gryffindor Seeker, the famed Boy-Who-Lived, felt a feeling he never experienced before, and welcomed it warmly and happily. He laughed when Thanos slid into a patch of mud and stood up, guffawing and filthy; he blushed in embarrassment before doubling up on laughter when he, Kaltag, and Icarus crashed into Starbuck, who appeared winded but uproarious.

He celebrated with his team at their two-point victory over the Celestials, hooting with the others and racing around the pitch with their sweaters swinging wildly above their heads. Congratulating Ron on a job well done, the three hoisted the red-faced keeper on their shoulders and carried him around until he they flopped to the lush lawn. It was a euphoric feeling he absolutely desired.

He felt normal.

Pulling his sweater back on, Harry monitored Dean and Kaltag taking the goals down, their wands extended, and their mouths muttering several spells. Ron was off talking to Starbuck, the ball being passed between them aimlessly. Icarus was chewing on what seemed to be a pastry, while Yorick and Thanos lay sprawled over the lawn. So this is what it felt like. Not having to worry about evil forces coming after you, or keeping an eye over your shoulder every moment.

As he watched a small Black toddler dashing up and down the pitch between the two knackered Paraffins, Harry wondered if Kaltag also felt the same.

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A/N: Revised chapter. R/R.

Chapter Thirteen:

- 1). Finally, a little sport (not without its usual finesse, though).
- 2). The weapons come into play.
- 3). Voldemort's ally makes an appearance.

## Chapter Thirteen: Snitches & Scepters, Swords & Saboteurs

Hermione bit her lip squinting at the parchment between her pink fingers. A quill was tucked judiciously behind her ear, blending well with her shaggy brown mane. Tilting her head to the side thoughtfully, her brown eyes scanned the names on the aged parchment contemplating their performance. On either side of her, Nikola and Harry also pored over the list, mumbling occasionally to themselves. Finally sighing heavily, Hermione set the list on her lap eyeing each of her companions.

"I don't think any of them are ready to be moved up," she summarized. "Maybe Susan and Philo, after a few more sessions. And Michael." A trio of Parador first years rushed out the portrait hole, followed by two Paraffin second years. A blur of ginger brushed passed Nikola's leg, and leapt into Harry's free lap. Crookshanks purred and settled himself on the Gryffindor, his smashed-in face set in daring Harry to knock him away.

"He's been working especially hard to get in the Elite." Nikola pointed out, crossing her arms and sighing longingly. "Young love." Harry grunted quietly, forcing out the memory of Cho's displeasure toward Ginny and Hermione. Scratching Crookshanks behind the ears, Harry remembered he hadn't had any more encounters with the Ravenclaw since then. Not that he was trying to run into her, but his evasive maneuvers anytime he spotted any Ravenclaw were improving.

"Right," Hermione agreed, though with a business-like tone. "If she does any worse, we'll have to move her down. Then they're back to square one." The Asian seeker had lacked any attentiveness in class, usually lingering in the very back, closed off to her surroundings and schoolmates. Hermione folded the directory and handed it to Nikola, who pocketed. "Perhaps they should focus more on safety and protection than themselves. They never know what could happen."

Harry was about to agree with her comment when he noticed Circe sweep through the common room, on her way out. Behind her were several seventh year and much younger boys, gawping and tailing her like puppies. Oddly, when the Entity waved at Harry with a smile, he didn't feel his inhibitions joggle anymore. He actually turned away and ignored the boys stumbling out of the egress.



"She's off to the Novice lesson. Aren't you going, Harry?" Nikola queried, clasping her satin periwinkle cloak on and standing. Sitting back and rubbing his tingly scar, Harry shook his head. The furry feline nestled his head against Harry's stomach, settling in for a quick nap.

"I went last week." He stated. "Besides, Circe'll tell me later. Anyway, Intermediates tomorrow night." Beveling her head, Nikola expressed her wishes for good rest and headed up the stairs. Harry noticed Hermione looking at his weary expression, furtively glancing at him and the fire. "Something amiss, Hermione?"

The clever witch produced a small grin, removing the quill behind her ear, and tracing the light feather trail down her magical feline's bottlebrush tail. "I should be asking you that, Harry." Her brown eyes sparkled with worry in the hearth light, seeking the somnolent emerald orbs. "What's wrong?"

Chuckling dryly, Harry focused his spectacles on his nose. "Got a few hours?" Hermione's face fell, and she nervously bent her quill. "Class work is heavier, Hogsmeade and Halloween is next week," he lowered his voice, glancing around the area. "Snuffles is coming to visit then, I've got three Defense Associations under my belt, and my scar has been tingling for a week. Not too mention the first Quidditch game is this Saturday. I don't think I can do this, Hermione." The prefect rested her hand on the Boy-Who-Lived's shoulder, squeezing it gently.

"I didn't know," she sounded genuinely sorry, and Harry noted her eyes were a bit duller. "I've been spending so much time with Nikola, I haven't gotten around to be with you and Ron. I keep forgetting—we're only human. And to have such a heavy load of work."

"You've got more classes than all of us, Hermione."

"I know, but those are meaningless compared to some of the things you've taken on." She put down. "Quidditch, the three Associations—and did you say Snuffles is coming next week?" Bobbing his head in confirmation, Hermione appeared thoughtful and condemning, staring at the fire. "But that's—"

"Highly dangerous?" Agreeing, Harry snorted. "That's Sirius."

"Does he know—"

"The risks? Mere annoyances in his view." Hermione harrumphed the Animagus' behavior, tucking the quill in her robes.

"But anyway, you can do this, Harry. I'll help you with homework. I promise. And if you need me to overlook any of the Novice classes with Circe, I'll get Ron to help me." She offered with a smirk. "But you're on your own with Quidditch." Chortling at Hermione's offers, the black-haired teenager pat her hand genially.

"Thanks, Hermione, but I'm on my own with this one. Although, I'll take you up on that homework offer."

Beaming, the two settled before the fire, mulling over the next two weeks. Suddenly, Hermione swung her head back in Harry's direction, narrowing her eyes. Crookshanks clawed some of Harry's robe before staring at passersby.

"Your scar's hurting?" Her hands were already locked to her hips, and her lips were as thin as McGonagall's.

"Tingly, Hermione. Tingly." He quickly corrected. "I haven't had any visions of the sort lately. So, he's probably planning or something, going through an arrangement of emotions. Who knows what goes on in that head of his." Huh, Harry scoffed to himself inwardly. I do. Hermione gave him a strange look, only to justify his thought. Turning back to the fire, Harry inclined his head slightly. "Right."

The portrait hole swung open to permit Ron, Kaltag, and surprisingly, Ella in the warm common room. The three had authentic, friendly smiles adorning their faces; their varying shades of titian hair making them appear more as cousins than siblings. Harry smirked lightly, both he and Hermione catching each other's eyes and grinning, thinking the same thing. It was like a redhead convention. Ron immediately spotted his best friends, turned to say his last words and sat with them. Kaltag, on the other hand, spoke with Ella for a bit longer, but grasping their books and bags anxiously. Ron plopped beside Hermione, setting his rucksack by his foot.

After being questioned by Hermione on his whereabouts the last few hours, since none of them had been at dinner. Ron clarified that he

and the Being were in the courtyard for a while, until Kaltag needed a history text. They ran into the lonely Gryffindor at a table in the back, and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening with her.

"She's wicked smart and quite amusing," he described. "So that was no fluke in Divination. She's also adopted." Harry inclined his head pensively, thinking back to when he spotted her in Flourish & Blotts. Her adoption explained the black-haired, supercilious people she accompanied. But something gnawed at Harry; there was something else familiar about the girl. Something he just couldn't place.

"Very kind, too." Hermione commented, tucking the quill in her bag beside Harry's leg. Kaltag sat in the armchair off to the side with a sigh. Glancing at his watch, he rolled his eyes, unclasping his robe.

"We have to patrol in an hour." He told the other prefects as he draped his robe over the arm of his chair and loosened his navy and periwinkle checkered tie. They nodded, and began searching the faces of the common room. Ella had gone up to the dormitory already. Crookshanks, who was following Ella's progress, immediately perked at the sound of Kaltag's voice. Bounding off of Harry's lap, the odd cat sprawled onto the Celestial's, eliciting a chuckle and a rub from Kaltag. "Where's Icarus?"

"He had to ask Tam something." Hermione answered, pulling her satchel to her lap and eyeing her cat with a scandalized look. Harry rolled his eyes when Kaltag and Ron waggled their eyebrows suggestively.

"D'you think he's asking her to the ball?" Kaltag questioned, cracking his knuckles and stroking the cat. Hermione, fishing out books and rolled parchment, shrugged.

"Don't know. Perhaps." She replied, yanking out the next day's potions essay. "Did you hear the new requirements?" Ron, who was absently picking at his robes, raised his head to look at the Gryffindor witch.

"Requirements?"

"The theme of the ball is 'masquerade.' Masks are now required, but not to be worn the entire time." She enlightened, opening an inkwell and unrolling her Transfiguration essay. "One of the professors

thought it pointless to have a Halloween Ball with an optional costume selection. Everyone would have just donned their dress robes." Ron huffed, sinking in his chair, the fire dancing spiritedly in his orbs. Harry frowned, running a calloused hand through his black tresses. He didn't have a mask. Were they supposed to make one?

"Hmm." Kaltag responded. "I need to owl my father for dress robes. Need any?" he asked Harry and Ron. Shaking his head, Ron stealthily read over the hunched Hermione's extensive essay for McGonagall's class. Harry, on the other hand, furrowed his brows. The only dress robe he owned was the wrinkly emerald one stuffed in his trunk at the foot of his bed Mrs. Weasley had bought him in fourth year. And he didn't even know if it still fit him. He didn't want to burden Kaltag and appear as if he was laissez-faire in getting one. It just hadn't crossed his mind. But Hogsmeade weekend was next week; he could just go to Gladrags Wizardwear and buy one, couldn't he?

Kaltag didn't wait for an answer, shrugging lamely. "I'll just have him send over a few. He can send various colors. If anyone needs a robe..." Moments later, a shaggy-haired, blue-cloaked Being lumbered down the steps, looking over the Paradors. As his eyes fell on Kaltag, he made a noise of accomplishment, and strolled over to him. Crookshanks furrowed deeper into Kaltag's lap, his claws no doubt sinking into the boy's garments. Harry believed he heard a slight wince from the prefect.

"Smythe." The young man spoke, gaining Ron and Hermione's attention. The Being in question jerked from his thoughts.

"Gill." The redhead recognized. The older male set on an all-corporate expression, crossing his arms across his broad chest. Sighing, Kaltag pushed himself up in the spongy chair, with Crookshanks deadlocking his eyes with Arthur Gilliam's. "I've already informed the team of Thursday night's practice." Inclining his head in an impressed fashion, the Paraffin captain slapped Kaltag on the shoulder and walked out of the common room.

Hermione glanced at the boys in a stern manner, before narrowing her eyes. "Don't you three have essays to complete?" The sixth years eyed each other exasperatedly, before scrambling to their sacks and pulling out various texts.

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"The Masquerade Charm is used especially in such cases like our upcoming Halloween Ball." Professor Flitwick tittered excitedly, his convulsive laughter nearly toppling him from his stack of books. Regaining his footing, the small professor cleared his throat, inching back to his normal spot with a rosier face. "It is, however, not a part of your N.E.W.T. examination." Harry heard Hermione exhale in annoyance a few students down between Isis and Nikola.

"Now then, the incantation is purely simple. Your mask will most resemble some part of your inner self, your personality. All of your masks will more than likely be completely different from each other's, so there will really be no bother in the same type of mask. They will also differ in size, from simple eye coverings, to large ornate masquerades.

"Wand movements are also important in concentration. To perform this spell, you must first close your eyes like so," Flitwick demonstrated, pointing his wand before him. "Swish your wand in a flowing figure eight, and incant 'agisamentum.'" A smooth jet of pale yellow spewed from the tip of the tiny instructor's wand, and in his hand, the class eyed a large brown mask, covered in leaves (dead and alive), twig and bark. Giggling to himself, Flitwick blushed, but waved the mask to the class. "Pronunciation is everything. Repeat after me, class. Ah-gee-sah-men-tum." The class reiterated the spell several times, before Flitwick put them to work.

It was no surprise Hermione had produced a shiny silver eye mask with ornate engravings in mere seconds. Next, Kaltag had conjured a crushed indigo velvet eye disguise, with an odd, polished gold scar slashing vertically through one eye. Icarus had already produced a medieval jester's facial plate, with many colors and the pointy hat atop the forehead piece. Professor Flitwick, who had taken to ambling about, was instructing Neville on the wrist movement.

After much concentration, Harry was taken aback at his mask. The eyes were slit just enough for him to see clearly through, outlined in a dark color, with shiny emeralds at the corner of each eye. Ivory and black pearl riddled the mask in alternate patterns, catching the sunlight perfectly. At last, the rising peaks at the edge of the icy mask curved into subtle, but graceful ears.

"Wow, Harry," Icarus started. "A white tiger. Are you privately ferocious and aggressive?" The seeker merely blinked at the mask, studying it in confusion. How could he be a tiger? How did that signify his personality? Ron prodded his wand at his own mask, a handsome navy facial plate, complete with pointy ears and an elongated snout. Kaltag, who sat between Ron and Ella, lowered his brows, eyeing the prefect's mask in interest.

"The mask of Anubis." He breathed to himself. Ron caught the Paraffin's words, staring at the mask, and his dorm mate.

"What?"

"Anubis, the Egyptian jackal god." Ron's eyes widened and he observed the matted mask in the sunlight.

"Oh, right." He replied in a falsely knowledgeable tone. "Must have slipped my mind." Harry snickered, earning an elbow from Ron. The Gryffindor keeper examined the Boy-Who-Lived's disguise, cocking his head to the side. "A tiger, then? Better than a snake." Harry nodded dejectedly, glancing at his mask.

"Better than a rat, too." Readily agreeing, Ron's gaze flicked over to Ella, who was talking to the redheaded Paraffin prefect about her pure jade mask, complete with runic etchings. Her mask looked more like a forest camouflage, with jade leaves clumped decoratively, pointing in all directions, overlapping, and two aurum leaves accenting the outline of her eyes. The boys set their attentions on the rest of their classmates, watching in fascination as the Paradors and Hufflebores found out what their masks will be.

Neville was nervously trembling at his furry eyewear; Thanos was trying on his full-head masquerade, a bronze helmet, complete with a stern face shield. Yorick was examining his wooden eye mask from all positions as Parvati and Lavender compared their frilly or feathery pink masks.

"So, have you?" Ron questioned, wiping a spot on his mask. Harry lowered his eyebrows and faced his friend.

"Have I what?" Ron wiggled his head side-to-side in a decisive measure before glancing back to his mask.

"Asked anyone to the ball yet." The Boy-Who-Lived colored lightly, shaking his head, letting his emerald eyes fall to his mask.

"No. I just know I'm not making this into another Yule Ball." He admitted determinedly, smiling at the passing Flitwick, ignoring the tiny man's praises on such a unique and well-crafted mask. Ron narrowed his brown eyes in curiosity, leaning on their table.

"How so?"

"I'm not waiting at the last minute for a date." He folded his arms, scanning the giggling girls across from him with a grimace. "I mean...there are plenty of witches and Entities alike, right?"

"Right."

"I can easily ask one to be my date." Harry spoke more to himself than to the smirking Ron.

"Spot on." Ron commented, flicking a dust ball off of their table. "So, you'll have one by this afternoon?" Harry raised an eyebrow at his best friend, clutching his tiger mask in one hand. Sighing heavily and shrugging, Harry's eyes met Ron's.

"By the Quidditch match, then."

"You know, you're way behind," Ron informed, tucking his book away. "Nearly everyone in our dorm has a date."

"You don't have one."

"Hermione accepted my offer last night while we were patrolling." Harry gazed at Ron wide-eyed, before shifting his attention to the chatting Hermione. How did he miss that?

"You...and Hermione? Together? For the ball, I mean?" the Weasley prefect blushed brilliantly, but nodded. "Missed that."

"I'm not surprised."

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Professor Snape leered over the sixth year students, his arms tucked across his chest. He resembled nothing less than a feral beast about to pounce on his nervous prey. And the Paradors knew they were in trouble. Professor Jace was assisting Professor Chiron in Defense Against the Dark Force today, of all days. Snape looked like the end of the school year had come early, his dark eyes wild and his yellow teeth bared. Harry couldn't help but swallow the obscenely large lump wedged in his throat. Kaltag and Ron were unusually still beside him, not taking their eyes off their smirking instructor. His emerald eyes flicked over to the decidedly Averin part of the dungeon, where Xenik and Malfoy flashed them malevolent grins.

"It is with the deepest sorrow that I express the absence of Remedies master Professor Jace for today's class." Snape simpered nastily, his eyes locked on the Gryffindors and Paraffins near the back of the room. "Goodness knows how long I've tried to rid myself of his bothersome presence, if but for a short while." Sniggers erupted from the Slytherins and Aves, while the other houses scowled deeply. Snape regarded his favored students arrogantly, before whipping his greasy locks back in the Paradors.

"I trust you perused the assigned reading of last class," he walked around to his desk, lifting the stack of parchment. "But I doubt you dimwitted students understood it, by the state of these shoddy essays." Hermione and Kaltag made small protesting noises to themselves, narrowing their eyes at the dark-haired professor. Both had surpassed the required amount of two and a half rolls with their five and six rolls on Veritaserum. Harry raised an eyebrow, frowning at the man. His last few essays were graded with 'E' and 'O' by Professor Jace, but Snape was set on giving him 'P's and 'D's. He knew his work was much better than those, and even Acceptable work; Hermione, Icarus, Kaltag, and Tam—the top potion brewers in the class—had looked over his essays during their impromptu meeting in the library.

Snape had lifted another set of parchment from his desk and was now handing them back to their owners. With his beams at the Slytherins and Aves, Harry knew they were the ones to get high scores from him. Lavender emitted a high-pitched squeak as she received her essay back, staring in disbelief. Hannah Abbot was nearly in tears when she got her essay back. Hermione beamed superiorly, tucking her essay in her bag. As usual, Snape lowered



his brows at Kaltag as he handed back the Celestial's essay, and glared at Ron and Harry when giving them their essays.

And as normal, Harry's was covered in conflicting marks of red (from Snape) and green (from Jace).

Jace awarded him an E, while Snape delivered his grade of P. The man went on to the next victim in a flurry of billowing robes, slapping Icarus' essay down before him. Harry overlooked the bickering comments on the paper by both grown professors, and compared his essay to Ron's. The prefect had received an A and a P from the professors, with hardly any marks at all. Kaltag's parchment was nearly spotless, with Outstandings from both men, and Jace's small, penned maxim of, 'finally, we agree on something.'

"I don't see how Goyle could get an 'E' from Snape," the leaning Icarus whispered from the table across. "Jace downright gave the gorilla a 'T'." Professor Snape retook his position before the class, glaring at them.

"Mr. Inigo, name one physical property of Veritaserum." Icarus sat straight in his chair and stared wide-eyed at the monochromatic man.

"It... doesn't smell." He replied confidently. Snape sneered at the boy, scrunching his bushy eyebrows.

"Five points from Parador," he disagreed. The Gryffindors and Celestials made small sounds of protest, since the Paraffin prefect was correct. "Mr. Malfoy?" The haughty-looking blonde leered at the seething Icarus and turned his perfect blonde head to his head of house.

"It's odorless, sir."

"Ten points to Slytherin."

"What the—?"

"Five more points from Parador, Mr. Inigo, watch your tongue." Snape ordered coldly. Icarus slumped angrily on his stool with Tam patting his arm sympathetically.

"Mr. Weasley, another property." Ron's eyes broadened, and Harry could hear Malfoy and Xenik snickering to themselves. The Gryffindor could see his best friend's determined face and pondering eyes, thinking over his words carefully.

"Er...Veritaserum is...colorless, sir." Ron answered, raising his chin slightly in a superior gesture. At the other table, Hermione beamed at him, shooting a scathing look at the Averins. Snape raised a thick brow and moved on to another target. The redhead released a sigh of relief, sending a lopsided grin to his companions and Hermione.

"Ms. Xu, what are the required amounts for ages five to thirteen?" Snape questioned, a bitter tone in his voice.

"None." Tam responded unfalteringly. "It is illegal, not to mention harmful, to give a child Veritaserum." Snape nodded curtly before surveying the class.

"Ms. Brown, the third physical property." Lavender gulped, staring at the man under the veneer of a deer caught in Muggle headlights.

"No taste...sir?" she replied meekly. Snape released a small smile.

"Ten points from Parador, dim child." With a furrowing brow, Harry watched Lavender's eyes gloss over. Kaltag sat up in his stool, glaring harsh daggers at Snape. Either by the torchlight, or his forces, the Being's eyes glowed a golden orange.

"What an—"

"Ms. Demas?" Snape inquired of the top Aves prefect.

"Flavorless, sir." Marieke Demas answered with a malevolent smirk. Pansy nudged her with a shoulder, and as one, the Averin prefects turned to Lavender, with silent a tear coursing down her face, and laughed. The potions master sneered at the weeping Gryffindor; Harry, Kaltag and Ron glowered at the professor with everything they had. The only Slytherins who didn't share in the taunting were Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini. The two had reluctant grins on their faces. Harry vaguely registered a warm heat emanating from the incensed Being beside him.

"Bastard." The boys heard from Nikola, Hermione and Ella's table. Hermione and Nikola faced the newest Gryffindor startlingly, before gauging Snape's reaction. The man hadn't seemed to notice, as he went on flinging questions to the students. A few of the Ravenaires, Hufflebores, and Paradors snickered under their breaths, including Hermione.

Of course, Snape leveled his gaze at them next.

"The most important ingredient in Veritaserum, Mr. Potter?" he ground out, narrowing his eyes at the famous Gryffindor. Harry creased his brows, mentally picking out the ingredients in his head. It was something of a comical name, he knew that much; Hermione had also pounded it into his and Ron's head while they were writing the essay a few nights ago. Hermione's hand shot up in his defense, the first time since Snape began his interrogations. The master of potions did his best to overlook the clever witch's immobile hand, choosing instead to pierce Harry with his black gaze.

"Uh..." he knew it. It was simple; he'd read about it in two books before. In the front, Malfoy was giddy with glee at having the to see the Boy-Who-Lived upstaged and knocking several more points off of the Lion House. Harry wouldn't let the blonde have the satisfaction; if only he could remember the ingredient. Snape raised an eyebrow at the Gryffindor, a smirk pulling at his lips. Ella was right. The man was a heartless fiend. Swiping his quill across the worktable, Harry jerked to attention. "Jobberknoll feathers." He recited. "Sir."

Snape looked at the boy sourly, before grinning like a toad. "Five points from Parador, Potter, for taking a considerable amount of time." The Paradors unpleasantly frowned at the instructor, shooting Harry an understanding look.

"Even if he didn't answer it, you'd still take away points." Icarus murmured, glaring daggers at the teacher.

"Did you say something, Inigo?" Xenik called, feigning an ignorant expression. The Black prefect scrunched his face in revulsion, ignoring Tam's warning words to ignore him.

"I wasn't talking to you, wart-face." he countered irritably. Xenik's face fell into a contemptuous frown.

"Ten points from Parador, Inigo," Snape chided, his face set in anger. "I thought I told you to watch your tongue."

"That's kind of hard when it's in his mouth, sir." Brittlebore humorist Stavros Niendar pointed out, earning several snorts of laughter from the three other houses. The potions master wasn't impressed and unleashed his wrath on the Sliatyckx commentator.

"Twenty points from Hufflebore, Niendar." Stavros quickly shut his mouth. "Smythe, name another constituent."

"Which one, sir?" Starbuck questioned, glancing at his siblings.

"Five points from Parador. Name one, Mr. Smythe." Snape immediately deducted and chided. Nikola scoffed in fury, gaping at the older man.

"There are two Mr. Smythes if you hadn't noticed." Ron pointed out, determinedly holding Snape's derisive look.

"Another five points. Perhaps Ms. Granger can answer without such confusion." Malfoy and company was tittering freely amongst themselves, holding their head of house in high regard. Ron and Harry gripped their quills in sheer rage, looks of disgust adorning their equally pink faces.

"Ravenswood sap." Kaltag answered, his brows lowered dangerously and flickers of orange and gold dancing across his eyes. Professor Snape turned to the Paraffin prefect in surprise, taking attention away from the anxious Hermione.

"I asked Ms. Granger, Mr. Smythe."

"But you asked me first." Snape's sallow face drained to a livid whiteness. A vein could be seen gradually coming forth on the side of his forehead, and his teeth were bared slightly.

"Fine, Mr. Smythe." He bit out. "Name all components in the Veritaserum brew. In order of which is added, its consistency, and its amount." Harry limply dropped his quill on the table. This was it. In a matter of moments, Gryffindor and Paraffin would lose a hundred points. This was the angriest he had ever seen Snape, at

someone else besides him. The seeker truly felt sorry for his housemate; the Averins were looking like Christmas had come decidedly early, and were shooting victorious looks at each other. Hermione appeared itching to answer that question, but shook her head supportively at her fellow prefect.

Yet Kaltag calmly and placidly elevated an orderly red eyebrow and joined his fingertips together. Holding the seething potions master's gaze with his entrancing blue orbs, Kaltag proceeded to astound the class.

"Three millimeter wide chopped ginger root, thinly-sliced Puffskein tongue added two minutes later, four cups of eagle liver fluid, two shredded Jobberknoll feathers after an eight-minute interval," he evenly listed, while jaws dropped around the dungeon room. Even Snape vaguely appeared stunned. "Then add exactly two and half vials of essence of belladonna, twelve mashed translucent ends of the schooner porcupine's quills for potion's clarity, five crisp scarab grass blades picked under the crescent moon...

"Six spoons of pure sap from the Ravenswood tree to allot the potion its tasteless feature, eight dried Runespoor scales to give Veritaserum its odorless attribute, and three phials of water from a Kappa-infested body of water." He finished with a stony expression. Harry blinked when he noticed a smirk attempting to break free from his stanch lips. "Keep the cauldron on a low, simmer through the entire process, and only when you add the last ingredient should the potion be set to boil for exactly seven minutes, then pulled from the fire. If done correctly, it should take students forty minutes to complete. Anything else, sir?"

Severus Snape, Potions Master of Hogwarts School, tormentor of Gryffindors and their counterparts alike, stood before the silent classroom, staring at the challenging Being who had just delivered a smack to his face.

Figuratively, anyway.

Said Celestial sat contentedly between his Gryffindor dorm mates and good friends, holding the man's gaze unflinchingly. His fierce blue eyes were alight with a certain wittiness at having upstaged the sardonic professor. Shaking his head slightly, Snape narrowed his eyes at Kaltag, pursing his lips composedly. Harry was certain; even

the snarky Order member couldn't find fault with his flawless instructions. Ron was busy shooting unbelieving looks at Hermione and Kaltag alike, his mouth opening and closing every now and then.

"One point from Parador, Mr. Smythe, for your cheek."

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Ginny lobbed the quaffle at Madeleine, who executed a perfect Sloth-Grip Roll to avoid Wyatt's bludger. She really didn't need to, since Merrick swatted the offending ball back at the reserve team beaters, Wyatt and Wallis, seven feet away from her. Harry surveyed the practice in between scanning the skies for the golden ball to end this madness. He could see Ron flying back and forth before the hoops and between the poles, glaring at the players as if they were true Slytherins. After Madeleine faked a pass to Ginny (and instead, tossed it to Louise), Harry refocused on his task of besting the reserve seeker Thatcher Standish, who was nervously tailing the famed sixth year.

A groan from Louise let the seeker know Ron had successfully blocked the goal. Euan was now in possession of the quaffle, but before the boy could use his gain, he ducked from a bludger pelted his way by Kirke, allowing Madeleine to pluck the quaffle from his grasp. After a few crafty maneuvers for tricky sorts, the girls tried to faze the keeper, rapidly tossing the quaffle between the three of them, weaving between their beaters, striking the tough bludgers at the reserves until the five were one giant blur. The Chasers were surprisingly skilled, as bludgers missed them by several inches; they never even blinked. It was a strategy made by the co-captains they had rehearsed at every practice, and it was impressive. It was Ginny who finally scored a goal against her brother, after Ron was looking at Madeleine expectantly, as if she were to make the goal. The team cheered, before Ron tossed the quaffle back out.

Harry skimmed over the empty stands, making sure there was no one there to spy on them. After their tryouts, Harry and Ron decided it was best that practice received no visitors, even if they were from Gryffindor. Team focus was built, as well as set aside distractions. A glint of orangey-gold flashed somewhere by Gerard Bingham's goalposts, and before Harry even realized it, he had already sped the hundred or so feet to the area and felt the snitch beating inside his fist. Thatcher was a few feet behind him, and smiled respectfully,

before going back to observe the game. The chasers were now executing drills with each other, hurling the quaffle to their teammates, while Kirke, Merrick, Wallis and Wyatt struck bludgers at them. It was an effective exercise they constantly began and ended every session with. Gripping the struggling snitch tightly, Harry flew the length over to the practicing chasers, with Gerard in tow.

"All right, then," he shouted at them, making them halt. "I reckon we ought to stop now." Ron, who was still focused on the group in case the chasers decided to pull something, screwed his face in bafflement, and caught his co-captain's eye.

"WHAT?" he yelled loudly. Several team members covered their ears with their hands, blocking the redhead's loud voice from their sensitive ears. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU, HARRY!"

"END PRACTICE!" Ginny bellowed back. "For bleedin' sake, take those out, you prat!" Ron stared at Harry, not hearing a word from his sister, and shaking his head. He reached for his ears and yanked out flesh-colored earplugs, pocketing them.

"Can't hear a word with these things in," he grumbled, fumbling to find a pocket. "Must mean they're working well." Merrick, a Muggle-born, was informed along with the rest of the team about Slytherin's dirty tactics, and especially how they enjoyed targeting Ron. Rather than have the keepers much improved game, Merrick had suggested the use of enchanted earplugs (his father was a contractor), used to block out the sound from crowds and everything else. Ron only needed to take them out when Madam Hooch was addressing them on the field. The team either rolled their eyes or scoffed. Glancing at the dark orange sky, Ron faced his best friend.

"Blimey, Harry. It's getting dark. I think we ought to end, don't you?" Harry opened his mouth to say something, but merely pulled a reluctant smile on his lips and nodded.

"Right, Ron. Good practice, everyone."

"Slytherin won't stand a chance against us. Bloody get away with everything already..." The prefect added. With it being the week of the Quidditch match, jeers and taunts from the Slytherins were more abundant. Small duels broke out before and after meal times between the two Hogwarts houses, earning numbers of students a

stiff cot in the infirmary. Just this week, Seamus had gone to Madam Pomfrey, sporting a black eye and thin, wiggly tentacles sprouting from his nose; and a third year Gryffindor was hospitalized for a few days when an older Slytherin cursed him with hard to remove boils over his entire body. Of course, Professor Snape said nothing to his Slytherins for their behavior; but Professor McGonagall had reprimanded the entire house's manners by removing thirty points.

The fourteen members of the Gryffindor Quidditch Squads touched back down on the dark lawn of the pitch, shouldering their brooms, and wrestling the balls back in the trunk. Ginny opted to stay with Harry and help him pack the trunk in the broom shed, while the others headed to shower and dinner. Slytherin was to be on the pitch after dinner, since the game was tomorrow. The Celestials, Harry had heard, had practiced their last on the night prior, since McGonagall and Snape were busy arguing over who deserved to get the pitch tonight.

The two walked in comfortable silence to the storage shed, Ginny gripping her and Harry's brooms in her hands. Harry was hovering the crate before them, and caught a glimpse of a white bird entering the forest far off. The youngest Weasley cracked her shoulders and neck, breaking the silence with sighs.

"Tension," she stated. "Especially when there's a Quidditch match coming up." Harry snickered to himself, his wand trained on the aged trunk levitating in front of them.

"I'd think you'd have more tension for the ball, rather than a mere game." He returned lightheartedly. The fifth year smiled, blowing a few locks of sweaty red hair from her forehead.

"Quidditch, I know," she stated confidently. "So there's the added pressure of me failing or messing up. With balls, I'm not partial to them, so there really aren't any expectations for me to follow." She tugged the keys from Harry's pocket and unlatched the door for him. "It's really only nerve-wracking when all you have to worry about is if a boy is keen on asking you, or if you brave it, and go it alone." Stuffing the trunk in the shed, Harry nodded, and slammed the door closed, locking it again.

"It's not easy for us either," he replied, swinging the keys on his index finger. "We try to find the right girl, and then worry she may not



be the one you really want to spend the evening with." With a snort, Ginny handed the Gryffindor his Firebolt back.

"Guess that means you and Parvati aren't going together again." Harry winced at the memory of being dragged around like a tournament dog on Parvati's arm, and the feeling of discomfort with her forcing him into things.

"She's going with Dean." Ginny appeared thoughtful for a moment before shrugging. Harry swallowed, biting his lip to speak his next line. "Neville's also out of the running." Ginny whipped her head around so fast her red ponytail resembled an ominous crimson whip.

"Is he?" she questioned, generally intrigued.

"Isis." Ginny's eyes broadened in surprised and on her lips was a ghost of a smile.

"I would have never guessed." She chuckled to herself. "I know Luna's going with Yorick, and Nikola with Thanos. Whom're you going with?" Harry gulped, searching the flickering lights in the castle rather than the brown eyes of Ginny Weasley. He didn't have a date. At least, not at this very moment. Gathering up what little confidence and Gryffindor courage he had stored, Harry finally met Ginny's chocolate orbs.

"You." He replied timidly. "If you want to, that is." The girl nearly missed a step but covered it by kicking away a stone. The sixth year bit inside of his cheek to keep from questioning her in anticipation. Ginny stared ahead at the castle, her eyes wider than usual, taking in the illuminated beauty of Hogwarts. Harry noticed his broom was becoming unusually slippery in his clutch.

"Flattering, really, Harry." She began, her tone one of irony. "You couldn't just ask with a normal, 'will you do the honor of going to the ball with me' number? Honestly, I think Ron's rubbing off on you." The two shared a smile and an amused laugh up the hill to the entrance hall, both feeling suddenly fifty pounds lighter and fluttery.

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"Eat up, now!" spry Arthur Gilliam was urging his Sliatyckx team. The seventeen Celestials gave him nasty looks, and continued to

push what little food they spooned around on their plates. The irritated captain reached for the spoon in the scrambled eggs bowl and dumped a heaping portion on the first string players' plates. He even went as far as to shove a spoon full of eggs into the droopy-eyed Icarus' mouth, earning him a punch. Rubbing the spot on his arm, Gilliam glared at his second orber.

"Let us alone, Gill," Kiden Kaenslar, a fourth year warned tiredly. "We can feed ourselves, you know." Her sister, fifth year Tess, nodded in agreement, swirling her oatmeal exhaustedly. Harrumphing to himself, Gilliam wallowed in his bacon, glaring daggers at the orber and slat sisters every now and then. Kaltag shook his head slightly, looking at Harry and the listless Ron, while adjusting his periwinkle Sliatyckx jumper.

"How're you two holding up?" he questioned, pushing the extra helping of eggs onto the unsuspecting Starbuck's plate. Ron shrugged, playing with the victuals on his plate while Harry yawned, turning to face Ginny. Merrick's eyes were wide and darting every which way, and he was babbling to himself nervously. More students poured in for a quick breakfast, including a few Gryffindor sixth years.

"All right, I guess." Ron replied, forking the sausage and nibbling an end. Hermione entered with the sixth year girls, taking her seat between Ron and Philo Balthazar. She threw the boys a quick smile, nervously greeting the blushing keeper and pulling her black cloak tighter over her shoulders. Endymion grinned at all of the sixth year males, her grin lingering on Kaltag before she cleared her throat.

"So, Halloween's next week." She informed. The others nodded, while Ginny blushed as she glanced at Harry. "I was going to owl my mother for dress robes."

"I owled my father." Kaltag replied, chewing bacon rapidly. Endymion poured a goblet full of citrus juice and casually sipped it.

"You know, I heard Selene's going to the ball with a Slytherin," she revealed, gaining attention from Kaltag. The prefect looked up with a startled expression, before nodding in acknowledgement.

"I figured as much. She's been hanging around Nott and Zabini for a while." Smythe answered.

"Oh," startled Endymion responded. "I see." Harry viewed other students pouring in (including Luna with her Gryffindor Lion hat) and Cho, skipping in flippantly with a slack-faced Michael. The Gryffindors returned to breakfast as usual, while the head table emptied of professors and prefects Weasley and Granger conversed in low tones about random topics. Ella was the first to leave the table, beaming at Kaltag and the others.

"Good luck today, Kaltag," she wished, fixing her Gryffindor cloak. "And to you, Harry, Ginny, and Ron." She nodded to each in respect.

"Thank you, Ella." They all replied as she went on to wish the rest of the team players good luck and exited.

"Is she going to the game today?" Ginny inquired, munching toast. Ron shrugged, returning to talk to Hermione about their chances of winning.

"I don't have a date to the ball yet," Harry heard Endymion confess. "Do you?" The girl's eyes were large and hopeful as she waited for Kaltag's invitation to the celebration. The Being, however, gulped down some milk, wiping away his mustache with a cloth napkin.

"Actually, I do." He replied, ignoring various utensil clatters around him. Endymion's eyes expanded and her face fell considerably.

"Oh." Was all she could manage. "Who?" Harry agreed with Endymion, and could tell he wasn't the only one interested in who Kaltag was escorting to the ball. Half of Parador expected him to ask Endymion; it seemed she was expecting this, too. Ginny, Ron, and Hermione became awfully silent, staring anywhere but the ginger-haired Being.

"Oh...Ella."

"She didn't tell me she was asked." Hermione exclaimed quietly, somewhat hurt. Endymion remained quiet for the rest of the meal. Harry quickly glanced at Ron's watch, and inhaled intensely. Before he could open his mouth, a great clamor was heard, as loud footsteps bounded their way with a purpose. A bright assembly of violets and bottle greens were amassed behind the Paraffin Sliatyckx team, with Xenik and Malfoy leading them. As Xenik deadlocked his eyes on Kaltag, Malfoy's gray eyes pierced Harry.

The Gryffindor felt Ron stiffen and noticed the Slytherins were wearing their 'Weasley is Our King' badges.

"Watch yourself today, Smythe." Xenik hissed in warning to the less-than-thrilled Paraffin assistant captain. The redhead merely cocked his head to the side and shot the Aves deputy an annoyed look.

"Forgive me for not quaking in fear and scampering off. It's still morning, mind you." He dryly mocked. "You're really intimidating. Honestly." Xenik simply scrunched his face in disgust and stalked off with his cohort, Erik Hansen in tow. Draco remained in his spot, glowering at both Gryffindor captains.

"This game'll be different, Potter. You won't win." Crabbe and Goyle guffawed behind him, their many chins rumbling like a fleshy ocean. The seeker couldn't help but snort to himself, Ron joining in with an amused Ginny.

"Did Trelawney make that prediction, Malfoy?" the Gryffindor chaser joked. The heir of the Malfoy Empire glared daggers at the youngest Weasley before stomping away with his entourage.

With few exchanged words to their team, Harry and Ron lead the anxious group out of the great hall, amidst hearty applause and Luna's deafening lion roar.

Harry fumbled with fastening the last button on his scarlet Quidditch cloak, his and Ron's crimson Quidditch Captain badges pinned to the front of the robes and gleaming in the little sunlight they had. Overhead, the din of students filling the stands under the cloudless, blue sky could be heard, and Harry could faintly hear Luna's lion bellowing. He knew what was next. Wood always did this. The pre-game pep speech. Was it normal to be this nervous? But Ron was here, so wasn't that a bit better?

"You want to go first or should I?" the prefect asked his partner, his Cleansweep Seven clutched in his fist already. Harry examined his teammates; Merrick had calmed considerably, and was now performing the arm exercises with Kirke; Madeleine, Louise, and Ginny were going over last-minute details in their flawless plays. The reserves hung out in the corner before they disappeared into the stands to watch the game. His heart was beating faster, and he just

didn't know why. He never felt like this before a game. He never had something to prove then, and he surely didn't now; did he?

"You go." He offered Ron. The redhead seemed more calm and collected than his best friend at the moment. As Harry took in calming breaths and made sure his Firebolt was in his grasp, Ron began his talk.

"All right, listen," the team immediately settled down and focused on co-captain number one. "There's really not much I can say, you know? You and Harry, as well as I both know we're an awesome team. Just grant me one favor. Go out and have fun. This isn't a job, and no one is going to clobber you for messing up. Fred and George have gone already, so there's no need to be frightened," he joked, easing the leftover nervous tension and earning laughs from the males and females. "Do your best and have fun. Slytherin doesn't stand a chance against our excellent chasers," he motioned to the beaming girls. "Our matchless beaters," Kirke and Merrick knocked bats in accord. The keeper spun to face the smirking Harry. "Or our number one seeker."

"Nor our superb keeper." Harry added more confidently to answer Ron's red ears. "We're a great team. And we're going to clinch that championship. We haven't been beaten by the Slytherins yet. I'm sure not going to let them win now." The Gryffindor Quidditch team became fired up and cheered; slapping their palms together while the girls hugged each other and the boys. Shouldering their brooms, the team held their heads high, and marched determinedly onto the field led by Ron, smiling widely at the deafening roars they received from the six houses that supported them. Harry spotted Ron quickly shoving one earplug into his ear, and leaving the other in his pocket.

"Welcome to the first game of the season!" New commentator, fourth year Ravenclaw Orla Quirke began. "On the pitch is Gryffindor, the defending champions of the coveted Quidditch Cup, lead by the inseparable captains Weasley and Potter. It looks like Potter's ban has been lifted, it has. Good show, Harry! They will begin this season's opener against fierce rival, Slytherin. Here come the Slytherin Team, led by Cap'n Draco Malfoy. One can clearly see, they are looking every bit as drab and stone-faced as their spotty founder has usually been depicted—"

"Ms. Quirke..." Professor McGonagall began warningly. A nervous titter was heard.

"Sorry, ma'am. My 'pologies." Malfoy was grinning smugly on his way to the center of the pitch, with his thugs Crabbe and Goyle lumbering closely behind. "The Gryffindor team has added three newcomers to their ranks, while the Slytherins have remained decidedly and all-male team, leaving no room for their weak-wrist female house members—"

"Quirke..." McGonagall's stony voice was heard.

"Jus' calling it as I see it, ma'am." Madam Hooch dragged the battered crate of Quidditch equipment behind her, laying her weather-beaten broomstick on the lush lawn. She regarded the captains, and to Harry's delight, eyed Malfoy furtively.

"A clean game ladies and gentlemen," she commanded in a no-nonsense tone. "Captains, shake hands." All three were reluctant to do so, but Ron quickly extended his hand to the Slytherin and both boys pulled away just as rapidly. When it came to Harry, though, Malfoy leered, taking his hand and squeezing it as tightly as possible. Harry didn't even flinch, only raising a brow at the childish gesture from the Slytherin. Malfoy released his hand, wiping it on his Quidditch robe, and both teams mounted their brooms. As fourteen brooms rose simultaneously in the air, Madam Hooch unlatched the trunk, letting the bludgers and flash of gold loose. Eyeing both teams one last time with the quaffle in hand, Madam Hooch carefully made sure everyone was in place; Harry shot Ginny a good luck grin as Ron shoved an earplug in his ear and hovered before the Gryffindor hoops. In the bat of an eyelash, the quaffle was tossed high into the air, and first match of the season began.

"Ah, great capture by new chaser Madeleine Warner, as she weaves through Pucey an' 'round new chaser Baddock," Quirke commentated excitedly. "Warner passes to Louise Schmetterling, who is saved by a bludger from team mate Kirke—good job Andrew! Schmetterling launches it over to Weasley—boy, can this girl fly!" Harry circled the area, listening to the game and taking time to watch his chasers at work. "She swerves 'round Pritchard, passing the quaffle back to team mate Warner. Warner fakes—shoot it Mad, shoot it! SCORE, GRYFFINFOR!" An eruption of cheers was heard from the light blue and red section of the pitch, as the Gryffindors

rose to their feet in celebration. "A great goal by Madeleine Warner, making the score ten-zip, Gryffindor." Harry excitedly clapped for his team, making a loop over one of the teachers' stands.

"All right, Bletchley's looking a bit peeved, but I can't understand why. Aren't the Slytherins used to losing against mighty Gryffindor yet?"

"Quirke, if you don't remain impartial—"

"Got it, ma'am." She accepted. "Good job Gryffindor. Come on, you can do it, Slytherin." Quirke spoke in a forced, monotonous tone of boredom. Harry jetted around the pitch, getting a feel of the lukewarm air of morning whipping over his face, through his black hair, while Malfoy tailed him as usual.

"Not today, Potter." He shouted. Harry ignored him and grimaced at the Slytherins' next ploy. The mass began their original rendition of 'Weasley is Our King,' while the Gryffindors sang their version. It was just as well Ron couldn't hear a thing with the enchanted earplugs.

"Merrick Linwood slams a bludger back at Goyle, who nearly took the hand off chaser Schmetterling. Linwood bats another bludger back toward Crabbe this time, as Kirke joins the fray..." the commentator continued to dictate. "And with this diversionary tactic, the Gryffindors have managed to score two more goals, bringing their total to thirty-nil." Clearing her throat sarcastically, Orla took on the droning tone once more. "Come on, Slytherin. Make a goal. Any goal. You do have three to choose from...."

"If you're quite finished, Ms. Quirke."

Harry flew a lap around the pitch, spotting several of his professors in the stands. Dumbledore sat in the top box a few seats away from Orla Quirke, chatting merrily with Professor Chiron; McGonagall and Thetis commented about the game so far; Hagrid and Jace were sitting with the Paradors, both waving flags of house colors and yelling cheers to the Gryffindor team.

"Keeper Ron Weasley blocks yet another intended goal from Slytherin but—oh, Merlin's knickers. Slytherin scores, thirty-ten, Gryffindor." Malfoy remained feet away but kept a close eye on the Gryffindor seeker. Harry merely shook his head at the Slytherin,

focusing on the game and finding the snitch. He couldn't wait to watch a real Sliatyckx match. Icarus and Thanos had been yammering on about it all night. A shrill whistle pulled him out of his thoughts, and Harry sought out the problem. Draco was busy laughing heartily on his Nimbus Two-Thousand and One at his team. "It's a penalty shot for Schmetterling as the firs' dirty play 'as been executed. Crabbe, dimwitted though 'e may be—"

"QUIRKE!"

"I meant, he tried to tell Madam Hooch that 'e thought her BLONDE HEAD was a bludger, but being so slow, 'e got lost—"

"YOUNG LADY!"

"Forgive me, for I know not what I say. And Schmetterling shoots—what's with Slytherin's keeping today? Whip your team into better shape, Malfoy!" Orla taunted over the system.

"Quirke...!"

"Professor Snape can't be too happy, I'll bet."

"QUIRKE...!"

"I 'ave a suggestion for the Slytherin captain: it's called practice."

"QUIRKE! This is the LAST STRAW!" McGonagall's harsh voice could be heard without the use of the commentator's microphone. The Boy-Who-Lived rose a few feet in the air, drowning out the cheers and commentating.

He was here for a purpose. And Malfoy wanted to pluck that purpose out of his grasp. The Gryffindor considered his options: he could utilize his state-of-the-art, international standard Firebolt and give the lazy Slytherin a chase, or feint. Rubbing the polished handle beneath his thumb, Harry narrowed his eyes. Malfoy should—by now—realize when he's being feinted or not. He couldn't possibly fall for that ruse again. The Slytherin couldn't be that thick.

On the other side of the field, the Gryffindor chasers were doing spectacularly in their rapid-fire quaffle tossing, between Kirke and Linwood, the blur of red and gold approaching the confused



Slytherin keeper. Malfoy was a ways away, focusing on the vague shape looming toward the nervous Bletchley. It was now or never.

"ARGH, WHAT WAS THAT? HOOCH, YOU CAN'T ALLOW THAT MONKEY TO DO THAT! GRYFFINDOR DESERVES A PENALTY! "

"MS. QUIRKE!"

"WHAT ARE THOSE SLYTHERIN BEATER FOOLS DOING? MIGHT AS WELL CHUCK THE BLUDGERS AT THEIR OWN HEADS! MAYBE THEIR BRAINS WOULD FULLY FUNCTION!"

"You're toeing the line for DETENTION, Quirke!" The Gryffindor head of house threatened.

Harry held firmly to his broom, and kicked away quickly, speeding over the Ravenclaw stands. Just as he expected, Draco Malfoy tried to match him, only a broomstick-length away. The smear of faces and colors beneath him swirled out of sight as Harry zoomed across the pitch, his eyes set on his false target. Behind him, the Slytherin captain growled under breath, pushing his broom to its limit. A resounding thwack could be heard in front of the rapt scarlet and gold seeker, but Harry did not move.

He was nearing his goal; he could see it heading directly at him at an alarming velocity. The green-eyed boy flattened himself over the slender piece of wood, and willed himself to keep up the gambit, not to step out too soon. Malfoy's heavy breathing was quite audible now, and he was but an arms length from the bristles of Harry's Firebolt. Clutching his prized possession tightly, Harry narrowed his eyes and the advancing, dark blur, mere feet away from him, before jerking up quickly to the blue sky.

Malfoy's shout only confirmed his suspicions. The seeker had rammed directly into a bludger, swerving only a bit out of its path.

"Oh, poor Malfoy's gonna to feel that tomorrow," Quirke amusedly reported. "Lucky it clipped his side and not anything of importance. A new, unquestionably unusual feint by Captain Potter." Harry grinned, despite himself, and observed an irate Malfoy chewing out Beater Crabbe for the bludger.

Gryffindor tallied ninety points, and Slytherin had only forty. The black-haired teenager decided it was best to end the game now, to leave more time for the upcoming Sliatyckx match. Squinting his eyes around the field, Harry spotted his reward, darting around the ground near the Hufflepuff stands. After a quick glance to his piqued opponent, the talented seeker swooped toward the mass of black and yellow, with the Slytherin seeker twenty feet behind him, clutching his side gingerly.

"And I think this is it, folks! The seekers 'ave spotted the Golden Snitch, which as you know, is worth a hundred an' fifty points." The commentator conveyed. Harry almost brushed the flapping wings of the snitch before it darted upward, causing his slight tip of the broom to follow the path of the golden ball. "An excellent display by Potter's top o' the line broom, maneuvering easily to the slightest touch."

"Are you selling merchandise or commentating, Ms. Quirke?" the annoyed voice of Professor McGonagall rang out.

"The Firebolt deserves its fifteen minutes of fame, also, ma'am."

The dark-haired boy followed the progress of the snitch, urging his broom to push itself further. Gritting his teeth, Harry extended his arm, swinging to catch the evading prize. At last, his fist closed over the dodgy snitch, its wings beating fiercely in his enclosed palm, trying to find a means of escape. Flying toward the ground, beamed at the mad shouts of approval.

"That's it, students, professors and ev'ry thing in between. Potter has caught the snitch—as we all knew it would happen—"

"You're just begging to be sacked, aren't you, Ms. Quirke?"

"An' reigning champion GRYFFINDOR WINS!" Orla yelled to the lauding houses. "Final score, 240-40, Gryffindor. Stay put as the highly anticipated Paraffin versus Aves match begins. GO PARAFFIN!"

When Harry touched down on the lawn, he was smothered by scarlet robes and screaming chasers. Madeleine and Louise squeezed him around his neck, hollering in his ear, as Kirke and Merrick thumped him on the back. Ron ruffled his hair and pulled out his earplugs, jumping at the rush of sound.

"Blimey, was it always this loud?" Across the field, the Slytherin team was entering their changing rooms with their heads bowed and scowls on their faces, and Madam Pomfrey the Mediwitch was handing the captain a vial of tan potion. Ginny embraced Harry with a vice-like grip, grinning from ear to ear.

"That feint was brilliant, Harry! You should've seen Malfoy's face when he spotted the bludger!" she exclaimed, clinging tightly to her broom as the rest of the team headed to the changing room. The snitch was still struggling in Harry's grip.

"Good game every one!" she extolled over the chanting of the houses. A gaggle of blue was seen exiting the Gryffindor stands. "You all were brilliant!"

"Unbelievable job, girls!" Ron complimented the chasers. "Merrick and Andy, you guys were awesome."

"Great keeping duties, Ron. You didn't even flinch when the Slytherins began singing." Harry pat his best friend on the back. Ron's ears glowed under his shaggy fringe, and Harry handed the fraught golden snitch to the passing Madam Hooch who congratulated them.

After the team changed into fresher garments, the Gryffindor players found their backs aching as they received countless slaps on the back and praises from their house in the stands. Harry and Ron had to slip away from Seamus and Dean's enthusiastic recount of the game, and Harry maneuvered through a group of shouting Paradors to escape the Creevey brothers' plead for a photograph. Hagrid applauded the team's efforts and winked at Harry and Ron. Hermione sat with Nikola, Ella, and Circe, saving the spot for the Weasleys and Harry. The teenager also noticed the abundance of red flags were now checkered navy and periwinkle, and Dean was holding up a banner with an expertly drawn blue phoenix.

"They've gone already?" Ginny frowned, looking around for the Celestial team.

"This should be interesting." Ron commented, glancing up and down the pitch. "Yorick was jabbering on about it after midnight. Had to pitch a pillow at him to shut him up." Harry couldn't help but grin and

feel especially euphoric. They had just won the first match of the season, and now he was set to observe what was to be an exciting sport.

"I wonder if any changes will be made to the field." Circe pensively questioned, eyeing the hoops.

"Thought there would be." Nikola answered, wrapping a bright blue scarf around her neck. A few Celestial professors were out on the field from what Harry could see, while none of the teams appeared. A short sound of feedback was heard from the commentator's box, followed by a scatty chuckle. Harry kept his eyes on the giant hoops at one end of the field, narrowing his eyes as he thought he saw them waver.

Quite suddenly, the three hoops at the opposite ends of the field shifted, melting and conforming, becoming more sharp and angular.

"Blimey..." Ron breathed, his brown eyes large and secured on the warping hoops. Three poles soon melded into one, thick, solid pole, sprouting three hoops (or rather, shapes) of various heights on the end. "Wicked..." As the wizards and witches studied the circular, square, and triangular hoop goals, a rumbling throat clearing was heard.

"Welcome, one and all to the annual Battle of the Birds—Paraffin Phoenixes versus the Aves Falcons!" Sliatycckx analyst, sixth year Brittlebore Stavros Niendar introduced. The students in the stands cheered as Harry vaguely heard Jace chanting the Paraffin cheer. "I don't know about you, mates, but I'm expecting this to be a relatively short match. Paraffin is unstoppable. Even Aves must admit that."

"Dear me, not another one..." Professor McGonagall complained to Thetis over the commentator's phone.

"Paraffin House is looking to gain another victory, leading them to the cup. The house has been unbeatable for four years straight! Most of us don't even have knickers that old!"

"Stavros..." McGonagall's warning tone was overheard.

"Aren't you tired of warning commentators, professor?" he joked. Hermione primly fixed her drooping knitted gloves, searching the

ground below. Harry had to cover his ears when the Parador yells and cheers became deafening. Ron and Ginny were hopping madly in their seats, and Harry had to stretch his neck to see what the commotion was about. Across the field, the sea of violet exploded into mad rooting.

"And stepping onto the field, the Aves Falcons in a lovely shade of purple, if I do say so myself." Niendar chuckled despite himself. "And the current Sliatyckx Trophy holders, the Paraffin Phoenixes!" All of Paraffin, Brittlebore, and Voltaire burst into more wails and cries of approval, waving their supporting flags. "Sliats for Paraffin include: tough Theion, gritty Gilliam and the terribly stunning Tess Kaenslar! Orbers are the champion Kiden and Yorick Kaenslar, Icarus Inigo, and Philo Balthazar!" Circe cheered for her younger brother happily. "Fenzer is the great Starbuck Smythe, and the Seeker is the sharp-eyed Kaltagonus Smythe.

"And the Aves Sliats are the cunning ladies, Demas, Isha, and Neptune! Followed by a slew of male Orbers, Hansen, Eryx, Burnum and Burnum. Burnum number three serves as Fenzer, and always the crowd pleaser, Captain Androcles Xenik is the seeker. Good luck, Xenik." A thin male stepped out onto the field with the odd contraption the Celestials had ridden on to get to Hogwarts on their first day and a thin, gnarled, gray box.

Emerging from the changing hangings, Harry finally observed the Paraffins on the field, advancing toward the hard-faced Aves. Xenik led his group with Erik Hansen plodding behind him, and dark-faced players. Arthur Gilliam walked side by side with Kaltag, and the two were looked as if they were talking to each other nonchalantly.

"Sliatyckx referee Professor Kemp takes the field with the equipment box and his trusty fin rider. The captains and assistant captains are now approaching each other for the pre-game hand wrestling session—squeeze 'em good, Kaltag—my mistake, Professors."

"What are they doing now?" Ginny inquired, wondering why the game was stalling.

"Kemp's making sure they know the rules, and will ask them to summon their riders any minute now." The future Entity of Intellect replied.

"Summon?" Harry questioned, furrowing his eyebrows. Were they going to summon their wind riders like he did his Firebolt in the task against the dragon? His query was answered as the eighteen players extended their right hands to their sides, and fin riders of various colors and textures appeared out of thin air.

"The riders have been summoned, and the players have now taken to the air," Stavros informed, as everyone watched the eighteen teenagers in the air. Professor Kemp opened the thin box, and immediately, four ghostly white glass balls rose into the air, trailed by a silver blur jetting across the field. "Orbs are in the air, followed by the Silver Scepter—my money's on Kaltag to win, naturally..."

"Mr. Niendar!"

"What? Truth hurts!" he responded in an irked tone. "Kemp's in the air on that hazard he calls a rider—I mean to say, experienced work of art, Professor Thetis, honestly, I did!" Harry followed Kemp's progress as he rose above the players, at least ten feet higher, and dropped the yellow ball on the midst of them. "And the Sliotaur is in possession of Kaenslar!"

Icarus, Yorick, Philo and Kiden had made their large, scaly sails disappear, and were crouched on their rider like Muggle surfers, swatting their bats at the orbs. The Aves orbers had done the same, and were hitting the orbs back toward the Paraffins. Starbuck veered in front of the goals, a look of determination on his rosy face. High in the air, Kaltag and Xenik were maneuvering their fins with the sails still attached. Harry focused on the strong orbers, thwacking the five white spheres to unsuspecting players.

"Five?" he muttered to himself. "Aren't there supposed to be—?" The Gryffindor's green orbs inflated. "The Scepter is an orb!" Ron quirked his mouth to a side, and lowered his brows.

"What?" He asked distractedly standing on his tiptoes to see over the jumping Paraffins. Kaltag and Xenik were busily whizzing through the air, the Paraffin trying to shake the Aves seeker.

"It looks like Xenik is executing the Mosquito Technique, latching onto the Paraffin seekers position and annoying him into making a mistake. How 'bout we look for that Scepter, boys?" the

commentator suggested. Thanos and Gilliam were flinging the sliotaur back and forth, occasionally avoiding an incoming orb. "Kaenslar to Theion, Theion to Gilliam, Gill back to Kaenslar, she shoots—and Paraffin scores twenty points through the square goal, leading the game's points!" The sliats celebrated and circled the area with their sailed fins and, chasing after their Aves opponents. "The celebration is short lived as Shomari Demas seizes the sliotaur. Demas narrowly avoids an orb launched by Balthazar, and she has set her sights on the Paraffin goal. You do have teammates, you know, Shomari.... Inigo hits a white one over to Demas only to be thwarted by Ulysses Burnum." Harry sympathized with Icarus as the prefect cursed loudly, before seeking out another unprotected Sliat.

"Demas has finally passed the ball to team mate Sirenia Neptune, who is advancing on Smythe's area. Here comes Yorick the Terrible, his bat ready and an orb in his path—BAM! It's heading for Neptune, will it—is it—YES!" The Gryffindor seeker paled, witnessing a bright flash of light and smoky tendrils envelope the Aves sliat, and the sliotaur dropped into the hands of Gilliam. "Neptune has gone to the White Wonderland as her purple orb swings back into action. Great shot by Kaenslar!" Hermione looked appalled at the barbaric display, shaking her head in disgust. "An additional ten points for Paraffin as Kiden Kaenslar pops an orb through a goal, leaving the score thirty-nothing, Phoenixes."

"Aves is now one player down." Nikola summarized. "Kaltag hasn't spotted the Scepter yet."

The game continued well into half an hour, with the score reaching 130 to 80, Paraffin. Harry ecstatically watched as the players executed crafty tricks with their fin riders, including Yorick and Icarus' Fin Copter, where they recalled their scaled sails and leaned horizontally, boards back to back, and spun at a brisk pace, aiming for the clump of Aves Orbers. Starbuck also managed a few sail saves, blocking the goal with the shield. The sliats performed so many tricks with the mustard Sliotaur, Harry and Ron both lost count.

Kaltag had spied the Scepter a few times, but was deterred by either a leering Xenik, or the Aves captain's personal bodyguard, Erik Hansen. After Kaltag's catches were foiled, the Silver Scepter seemed to disappear around the stands, occasionally coming forth in the appearance of another orb or the extra Sliotaur. Subsequent to Xenik's fourth blockade, the redhead took to the skies, out

maneuvering the dark-haired boy with what Stavros described as "a seeker's dream fin rider," the Cumulon SkySlicer. Unlike the older riders, it was silver, not the dark gold the others were, and the commentator was reamed for explaining it as "ten times faster than old Xenik's Sky Surfer 760." In short, it was the Firebolt of wind riders.

Ron and Ginny listened with rapt attention as Nikola described its attributes and special features; Hermione blandly viewed the game, turning every now and then to engage the awed Ella in conversation. It was as if the Gryffindor had never seen wizards fly before. Her eyes were fixed on the Paraffin players, and her brows wrinkled in worry at Kaltag's every dive. Xenik and Hansen were talking with each other over the stands, as the purple and blue orbs whooshed past them. Out of Paraffin, only Kiden was captured by Erik Hansen's stray orb, but the other orbers were playing strong, nabbing two orbers from Aves' side.

Out of the blue, the Paraffin seeker shot off after a hoary blur, darting at an alarming rate toward the Aves goal. Harry watched as Kaltag, in quick succession, released the bar on the fin's sail and the sail dissipated into thin air, leaving the prefect to hang ten. The crowd was on their feet, screaming at that the display, urging the seeker to catch the prize. Jace himself was bellowing at the ginger-haired Smythe to catch the Scepter already. Ron and Harry were encouraging him with hollers and observed Xenik and Hansen on his tail, Hansen with his bat tucked on his side, and Xenik moving in behind the prefect.

"There goes Smythe, he's finally caught wind of the Silver Scepter, and it looks like Xenik can't stop him this time!" Niendar stated in animation. "GO SMYTHE, GO!" The sixth year Entities, Ginny, Hermione, and Ella were hopping in their seats, waving their miniscule flags as if it would give the seeker more speed. Harry vaguely noticed Endymion in the far corner, also leaping from her seat.

Kaltag flicked his wrist, and a thin, silver rod settled in his hand, and the Being held it at least two feet away from the zooming ball. In the midst of shouting, Harry paused, turning his attention from the reaching boy to the Aves sixth years on his tail. As he watched them, he felt his stomach lurch uncomfortably, and a cold chill pooled at the bottom of his spine.



Something wasn't right.

In that instance, Harry slit his eyes and from afar, and thought he saw Xenik's hand go into his violet robes.

"It's too late to pull out your baton now, Xenik!" Stavros Niendar's distant voice spoke. The sound soon thinned out into silence. Ron, whose mouth was gaping in mid shout, stomped madly in his seat, yet no sound was heard. None from the red-faced Ginny, or Hermione, Nikola, nor Circe. The blurs of purple and blue streaking across the sky were oblivious to the Scepter chase occurring on the opposite side of the field.

Something was definitely wrong. Then it happened.

Both Hansen and Xenik pulled out their slender wands, the dull sun glinting off their spiteful eyes. Kaltag's rod arm was extended, determination and sweat pouring from his face. Both armed teenagers shouted something, and jets of purple and blue lights surged from their wand tips. As soon as the Scepter was caught in Kaltag's baton, the spells struck his body, the force shoving him off of his silver rider.

The sound was turned back on full blast as Kaltag's limp body fell through the air at an alarming rate.

"NO! XENIK AND HANSEN HAVE JUST ATTACKED KALTAG SMYTHE! THOSE DIRTY—" Stavros swore so badly even Hermione blushed. Yet McGonagall, Thetis, or any of the professors in the top box did anything to stop him. Dumbledore had his wand out, aiming it at the falling student, but he was too little too late. Icarus, Starbuck and Thanos had already rocketed over to Kaltag, catching him five feet above the ground. Jace and Hagrid, the others noticed, were already on the ground, as were Thetis, McGonagall, Dumbledore and surprisingly, Snape. Kenward, Kemp and the Aves head of house, Einar, were berating Xenik and Hansen angrily, but only Kenward hung in the back with a deep frown on his face.

"Oh, my goodness!" Nikola was teary-eyed and panicking. "Oh my— have they no shame? They could've—!" she sobbed, watching as Madam Pomfrey tended to her brother.

"Bloody cowards," Ron menaced heatedly, his teeth clenched tightly and exposed in a growl. "Bleedin'—!" Hermione's eyes were glassy, and she couldn't take her eyes off the scene.

"What spell was that? It looked dangerous!" she frenetically spoke, clutching her billowing scarf around her neck. Circe and Ella were attempting to calm the frantic Nikola, but the Entity just kept her blinking eyes on her brother.

"I have to—I have to see him..." she spoke distantly. "He's my brother...I..." The Celestial blinked once, and in a sudden cold rush of air, she was gone.

"Bloody...!" Ginny stared across the field. "How'd she get there so quickly?" The green-eyed boy returned his gaze to the stretcher hovering across the field, carrying the injured Being. His advance guard consisted of the Paraffin Sliatyckx team, his head of house, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Pomfrey and...Nikola.

"Entity of Intellect, remember?" Hermione answered in a flat tone. "Super speed and strength." The entourage of caretakers disappeared from the field and the stands began to empty out, the Paradors being the most angry and loud of the bunch. Harry and company made the long trek to the castle quietly, listening as Stavros Niendar ended his commentary.

"And it's 230 to 80, Paraffin. Our thoughts and prayers are with Paraffin's star seeker today; get well soon, Smythe." His mournful voice echoed over the vacant pitch. "Sodding gits, I hope they choke on Manticore dung...."

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Blind.

That was the diagnosis from Madam Pomfrey.

Xenik and Hansen had cursed Kaltag with particularly advanced hexes to blind him as a distraction, but succeeded in blinding him temporarily. Though no one but his siblings could visit him, the Mediwitch assured concerned students the Celestial would be out of the infirmary by Tuesday.

Members of the Paraffin Sliatyckx team were sullen-faced, and angry. Icarus in particular, since he was the prefect's best friend. No one had seen the Black prefect since he escorted the wounded seeker to the hospital wing, stormed back to the tower to change out of his robes then left again.

Harry hoped Kaltag would be all right with no permanent damage. From what he had heard, Xenik and Erik Hansen got off unbelievably easy by their head of house. The two were to have a month's detention with Filch and Thetis, and send Kaltag written apologies. The headmaster of Aripedes, Chiron, had only reprimanded the boys disappointedly, and left the punishment of the boys up to their head of house. Einar was in every way like Professor Snape, chastising the captains modestly and letting them off effortlessly. The black-haired Gryffindor snorted to himself angrily. No doubt they were probably sitting in the Celestial professor's office, clinking glasses of butterbeer and congratulating them on putting one of the Smythe's out of commission.

He lay on his side shrouded by his four-poster hangings, facing Kaltag's empty bed. A light symphony of snores pierced the early morning silence, Ron contending with Neville, Dean and Yorick. It had to be sometime near one in the morning, but he couldn't seem to be dragged into unconsciousness. Events from the matches crossed his mind like a Muggle cinema, reenacting the events in slow motion, exchanging Kaltag's falling body for his...Xenik's malicious smirk morphed into Malfoy's. Finally, his troubled green eyed fell closed and Harry buried himself into his plush pillow.

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The room was dimly lit, with four low torches providing minimal light. The walls were a lackluster russet hue, the paint peeling off of one particular wall, and its only furniture was a small, solid, stiff wooden chair. The chair groaned under the new weight of the newly appeared Hagrid, his beard and mane as tangled as ever, and his beady eyes wagging in the torchlight. In his fist, he grasped a hand carved wooden lute, and he placed the mouthpiece to his lips to begin a lively, toe-tapping tune.

Then Snape appeared, along with Jace and Thetis, the potions master clutching a round-bottomed beaker and grinning madly. Jace offered the elder professor his arm, and she took it. Together with

Hagrid's playing and Snape's mindless drumming, the two jigged, waving hands in the air and beaming. A heavily beaded Trelawney entered the scene, her bangles weighing her arms down, and she leapt around the skipping professors spiritedly with a sheer rose throw. The divination professor circled the two dramatically, performing a dance of her own with the scarf.

Soon Norbert, the baby dragon had joined the whimsical event, breathing fire back into the torches and flapping his small wings in flight over the heads of the dancing trio. The image of the happy five and the flying dragon churned portentously into a much darker, thicker scene.

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He sipped his hot tea prudently, allowing the scorching liquid to sweep past his lipless mouth and over his dull rosy tongue. It may have burned every other drinker's sensitive jaw, this bitter, acidic beverage, but he didn't mind. After all, it was all for show, just to please his guest. The heat pushing through the teacup's ceramic surface burned into his fingertips, causing minimal color he hadn't seen in years. Crimson eyes peered over the brim of the cup, catching sight of the goateed male.

His companion sat across from him in a beaten armchair, gazing into the fire and squinting his eyes. One could tell he had seen so much, despite the betrayal of his youthful façade. The light sprinkle of dark hair around his jaw and cheeks, his mangled hair and cold eyes; both men sipped the scalding liquid leisurely, sitting in pensive silence. One knew of the other's great power and tales of battles and death, based on obsession. The other was quite familiar with his acquaintance's cause, and all the lengths he would go through to achieve fulfillment. Both wanted the same thing. Power. Dominion. Freedom. And the only way they would gain such would be through there quiet teatime tête-à-tête.

The first man tipped the teacup to his bronze lips and swilled a bit of liquid into his mouth swallowing with purpose. His eyes surveyed the dark room, laden with aged dust and antique items and a crackling fire with distaste. "I see you are indulging in the benefits of victory, Tom."

Voldemort merely smirked at the insult. "Do you not find my palace enthralling, your majesty?" he mock queried, gesturing to the dust-blanketed drapes. "Is it not to your taste, Anton?"

"You are a Dark Lord," the man informed in a regarded tone. "Your palace stronghold should not compare to a Muggle compost habitat." Voldemort chuckled deeply, his vermilion eyes twinkling with dark mirth.

"Celestials. Still thinking in a regal state of mind. Even after you were excluded." He reminded viciously. The guest took up his cup and drank deeply before setting it down with a dull 'clunk.'

"My palace is far more extravagant than this...dwelling." He spat out the word irreverently.

"My reward will come when my purpose is fulfilled in due time, Anton." The visitor glared at the dark wizard, folding his hands before him.

"True. Tom." The wizard hissed, pushing his ceramic cup into his saucer and glaring at the man before him.

"Call me by my true name."

"And call me by my true name and I shall call you by thy feared appellation." The Being leered, adjusting the fur wrap he wore. The wicked man sat back in his chair, appraising the Celestial, who was taking in his surroundings. "I have to admit, the place has not change much since I last graced the Earth."

"Tis slow, you know of such. Muggles and wizards are nowhere near as advanced as us." The white-faced serpentine man explained, drinking the last of his tea. "Would you care for some more?" Anton shook his head negatively, holding the man's crimson gaze.

"I have no desire coming into further contact with your...servants." He condemned the word scornfully. "Especially your correspondent with a faltering tongue. I would think you'd have better servants than this, fearsome dark wizard." He ridiculed, grazing the dragon hide leather over his chiseled abdomen before lifting his teacup once more. The tormentor of the wizarding world snorted quietly, straightening himself in his seat.

"You find fault in my servants?"

"Servants?" he scoffed, setting his mug down. "Please. Your Death Eaters are nothing less than dogs. Following their master's every beck and call, doing all things to please their master." Voldemort's alabaster forehead creased as he observed his longtime friend.

"And what of your beasts? The snarling, drooling, ferocious creatures you call minions?" Anton erected a brow, narrowing his dark eyes at the dark lord.

"At least they have backbones." He countered. "Which is more than I can say for your feared Death Eaters."

"They are loyal when the time calls them to be."

"They should always be loyal." Anton pointed out smirking at the frowning, red-eyed individual. Voldemort narrowed his eyes, rubbing the fabric of his black robes between his fingers. Anton was correct; his Death Eaters were loyal, but like true Slytherins, needed to have something in it for them. Anton clearly had an advantage with his servants.

"You look no older than when we last met, decades ago. You are quite young for a man who has seen thirteen centuries." He lightened the tense mood, causing the banned Celestial to smile.

"The blood of Celestial unicorns and hybrids deserves the praise." The man declared, scratching at his spackling of facial hair. "Besides, I must always look good for my beloved and firstborn." At this, the dark wizard had to deeply frown. The prince was an intelligent man, yet clearly hallucinatory. It was his misguided and warped mind, which led to his first downfalls, allowing him to base his entire revenge on a mere illusion. The wizard sat back in his chair viewing the brooding Being.

"Still believe Athena will fall for you?" he taunted in disbelief. "Dear man, can you not see it is a lost cause? The boy is Athena's and Spiridon's, as well as his siblings." Anton scowled at Voldemort, slitting his eyes at something other than his companion. The fire swayed in his shiny orbs, piercing through Voldemort and past the room.

"He is my heir. My firstborn. If she shall not agree, all of her offspring with that sickening excuse for a Celestial shall suffer and die. That boy is no more Smythe's child than he is Ares'." The prince spat scornfully. The leader of the Death Eaters shook his head slowly before steering the topic away.

"Ah, how is our belligerent Being of War?"

"As well as can be expected, despite the disconnection of marriage." The man spoke bitterly, but smiled stubbornly. "Yet he is finding solace in the arms of another." Anton twirled an inky lock of grungy hair around his bronze finger. Voldemort leered, his depraved smile stretching across his serpentine face tightly.

"Peitho?"

Anton grinned wickedly and nodded. "Of course." The dark lord's red eyes positively glowed with reminiscence.

"My, she does get around."

"Mm. It is amazing she hasn't been with child by you already." Voldemort tapped his temple with two fingers, raising an invisible eyebrow.

"Wizarding knowledge, dear friend. Wizarding knowledge."

"So it does extend beyond your loins." The dark wizard frowned slightly, crossing his legs firmly.

"We are getting off the subject." He altered again, his eyes now hardening. Anton sensed the change of air and demeanor, and quickly fell into his business tone.

"Your...servant came to me with the proposition, in which I readily accepted. However, great Voldemort, I have not been in possession of these weapons." Anton enlightened, twisting the fur of his shawl between his thumb and index finger. "I myself believed these weapons to be myth as they were labeled on Olympus." Voldemort contracted his eyes.

"Yet, they aren't."

"You've asked me to go on a hunt for these imaginary weapons of power, friend. It's taken months and months of work to find out if they are even in existence." The impatient Voldemort leaned forward a bit.

"And?" The visitor sighed, glancing to the dusty floor then back to the blood-red eyes.

"It will be nearly impossible to get them now. The last I was informed, the Axial Battalion was in possession of them." He answered. "So the museums were a dead loss. You're getting quite slipshod, good friend."

"They are undoubtedly in the hands of its general, then." The Celestial's eyes toughened, and he gritted his teeth.

"Naturally. Or its blood owner." Voldemort nodded, steeping his fingers before his face.

"Where is the least likely place he would place it?"

Anton was seething in the chair across from Voldemort, making the fire waver slightly in his radiating anger. "In the hands of the least capable person. He would place it with a close friend or mentor." The dark man growled, staring at a mental depiction in disgust.

"Dumbledore."

"Exactly." Anton replied, leaning in his seat more. "The question is, where would the old fool put it?"

"In the safest place possible." Voldemort leered, flighty with glee. "The school."

"I guess you are not so rusty after all, friend." Both men chuckled to themselves, evil, cold, high laughter, plotting more of the capture of the weapons. "Dumbledore will undoubtedly tell others he deeply trusts about the whereabouts of the weapons. Especially protectors. Non-humans." The dark wizard nodded, considering their options.

"I will send my men to the forest to gather information by any means necessary." He organized. "And my spy and youngsters within the



school can inform me of any breakthroughs." Anton frowned quirking his head to the side.

"Is he true?"

"Of the truest." Voldemort defended. "Do you not trust my men, Mystikos?"

"You put your faith in men. Mine resides with my Legion members." He asserted. The evil sorcerer agreed, settling into his armchair with his steepled fingers. A deep smirk set in his tight face, as his eyes flitted to his acquaintance.

"At last," he breathily began. "The Ravenstone Scepter and the Sword of Amenophus will be in my grasp."

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A/N: Revised chapter.

Chapter Fourteen Clues:

- 1). Hogsmeade and Padfoot's appearance.
- 2). The Masquerade Ball begins.
- 3). The others start to inquire about the weapons (aren't you glad they have names now?).

## Chapter Fourteen: All Hallows & Hogsmeade

Harry sucked in a sharp breath, sitting up quickly in his four-poster and covering his burning scar with his hand. Sweat covered his face, and his body was clammy and tremulous. Breathing was a hard task, as he felt a sharp pain in his side, like a keen knife. The blurry hangings around his bed were missing, leaving only the dim light of the crescent moon as a source. Gasping to catch his breath, the teenager grit his teeth securely, wincing at the pain he was experiencing through the jagged, sticky disfigurement.

"Harry?" a barely audible whisper came from his right. "You had a nightmare, didn't you?" Ron's words came out more as a statement than a query. Facing the blurry form of his best friend, Harry nodded, quickly regretting so as his head pounded. "D'you need help or anything I can do? Should I get Dumbledore?" The redhead offered, leaning on the side of the cot. Shutting his eyes to regain his composure, Harry shook his head. What was the point of telling the old headmaster if he already knew about Voldemort and his ally? "Here." The prefect placed a dry cloth in the Gryffindor's hands.

"Thanks." Harry murmured breathlessly, soaking the sweat from his forehead, and pressing the surprisingly cool cloth to soothe his scar.

"Suppose your scar's hurting, then." Prefect Weasley muttered, glancing around at his snoozing dorm mates. "What's You-Know-Who up to this time?" The boy questioned; Harry could see his eyebrows knitted together in determination in the little amount of light, and yet, behind the business-like face of the redhead was worry. The green-eyed student stared at his best male friend with wide eyes, gripping the cloth in his hand.

"Voldemort," he ignored Ron's slight flinch at the title. "He was—was talking to his ally." Even in such poor lighting, Harry good see Ron's eyebrows unfurl and his mouth drop open in shock.

"What, like a meeting?" Harry eyed his sleeping housemates furtively, before reaching for his glasses and perching them on his nose. Grabbing his wand and his dressing gown hanging from the footboard, the Boy-Who-Lived motioned for the sixth year to follow him. After a glint of bafflement flickered across Ron's brown eyes, the prefect followed suit and the two made their way down the winding staircase to the empty common room.

The fire was low in the hearth, radiating slight warmth through the entire room. Stacks of abandoned or crumpled parchment littered the tables, chairs, and floor of the common area, including a few with crossed out Potions or Charms essays. On one side of the couch before the fire hung a black Gryffindor robe and its tie, and on a side table sat a lonely potted plant. The boys stepped around the mess of common room and after tossing a few stray parchments into the fire, sat down. Ron nervously regarded Harry, who stared at the fire massaging his scar.

"I didn't want to disturb the others, nor let them over hear this." He explained.

"Understandable, of course." Harry took a few moments of silence and focused on the dull green potted plant, rather than the throbbing headache coursing through his head. Rubbing at his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, Harry sighed distractedly.

"Ron, it's Anton." He revealed, gaining a look of confusion from the Gryffindor prefect. "Voldemort's ally is Anton." Ron's eyes broke from Harry's burdened expression, concentrating on the fire.

"You mean the same demented Anton that's been after your godmother?" he asked, his orbs broad. The dark-haired boy merely nodded, his pale, slender fingers toying with the four leaves of the plant.

"Only he goes by 'Mystikos'." He replied, letting his headache slow to a dull pounding. "Striking fear into the Celestial world. He's certifiably mental." Harry snorted cynically, turning to Ron. The ginger-haired male raised an eyebrow before his gaze darkened drolly.

"What dark lord isn't, Harry?"

"He still thinks Athena will be his wife. And he calls Kaltag his firstborn."

"So Mystikos is You-Know-Who's alliance. What, is he hoping to win her heart over like this? He's certainly battling this bludger with a toothpick." Ron derisively stated, folding his arms over his Gryffindor red robe. "Did you learn anything about the weapons?" Harry's face

brightened for the first time that night and he temporarily overlooked his headache.

"Yes!" he whispered excitedly, making Ron straighten and face him. "They're the Sword of Amenophus and the Ravenstone Scepter." Ron's eyes were as large as Galleons.

"And we've still got them, right?"

"As far as I know." The redhead's brows furrowed.

"Have you ever heard of them?" he asked. The green-eyed Gryffindor bit his lip, lowering his brows in consideration. Shaking his head slowly, his eyes met with Ron's.

"No, have you?" Ron, too, shook his head depressingly, before he perked up with a wide grin.

"I'll bet Hermione knows." The lanky Gryffindor shot up from his squashy seat and headed for the staircases on a mission.

"Ron, no! The staircases won't allow us remember? We're boys." Ron halted his foot in mid-air as he was about to set it on the first step. Turning bright red, the Gryffindor grinned grudgingly and stepped back to fall onto the couch.

"Right. Forgot about that." Harry smirked and rubbed his temples. As he looked at the plant, he wrinkled his eyebrows. In the weak firelight, the plant seemed to have grown a bit more, with darker leaves and a stronger base. The green-eyed boy shook his head. "Magical plants." He grumbled to himself.

"We'll have to tell her tomorrow." He decided, staring into the fire. "Besides, I don't think the whole tower wants to wake up to that blaring siren." Harry's eyes felt heavy, as his headache was beginning to take its toll.

"To bed then, mate?" Ron queried, curbing a yawn.

"Please." Both sixth years made it as far as the first step before they heard a sharp rapping on the window. Rolling his eyes, Harry stalked to the window in an irritated huff. "What now?" he growled. The plant on the table shuddered slightly before the fire. Unlatching

the dark window, the Gryffindor let in a young barn owl, clutching a tiny scroll in its beak. After Harry extracted the letter, the owl took off into the night. Ron closed and locked the window back as Harry read the notice.

"Who's it from?" The black-haired teenager sighed heavily, stuffing the note in his robe.

"Sirius. He wants us to meet him in the Shrieking Shack at two on Saturday." He divulged. "Forgot he was coming." Ron was about to say something but closed his mouth as the portrait hole swung open. The boys stared as Icarus walked in, apparently trying to sneak in without notice, but since both Gryffindors had spotted him, regained his composure and acknowledged them.

"Ron. Harry." He greeted rather stiffly. "Couldn't sleep?" Ron raised an eyebrow at the Paraffin prefect.

"We could ask you the same thing." He countered, earning a grin from Icarus.

"Had to do something." He answered dismissively. "Rather important. Good night, then." As the prefect ascended the stairs, Harry and Ron both lowered their brows as they picked up the faint smell of fresh soil, butterbeer and peanuts that now swept the room.

ooooo

Harry recapped his vision over again to Hermione the following night, as they cleaned up after the latest DA Elite class. Surprisingly, the bookworm hadn't heard of such weapons, in any class or read about it in any of her books. Ron had proceeded to stare at her in astonishment, yet kept his no doubt teasing comments to himself. After all, he didn't want to comb the school for another date six days before the ball if she refused his invitation after his taunting.

"So Voldemort's partner is Prince Anton." She summed, stacking the pillows tidily. "And now they know Dumbledore has the weapons."

"Mystikos stated the weapons were a part of something called the Axial Battalion. He thinks they're at the school now." Harry added, collecting more cushions. Hermione whirled around, her eyebrows lowered in significance at the DA leader.

"Did you say 'Axial Battalion?'" she questioned. Harry nodded, standing up with a few pillows in hand. Hermione chewed on her lip, narrowing her eyes. "Did Mystikos happen to say who had it specifically?" Harry frowned.

"Not specifically. He just said it was in the hands of the general. Or that the weapons would be in the hands of its blood owner." At this revelation, Hermione's eyes widened in comprehension.

"What?" Ron asked, placing a stack of pillows along the wall. One glance at Hermione, and he looked to Harry. "What?"

"Nikola," she simply stated with a small smile. "She and I have been spending much time together since our first day, talking about S.P.E.W., and homework and classes. She's got a great singing, voice, too—"

"Get on with it, Hermione." Harry interrupted hurriedly. The prefect scowled at Harry, crossing her arms.

"Well, when we were talking about our lives, she told me her father worked for the Axial Battalion." She revealed. Harry and Ron raised their eyebrows.

"Spiridon Smythe." Ron stated. Hermione nodded in affirmation.

"And guess who the general is." Harry's lips parted slightly at the news.

"Spiridon."

"Exactly." Ron voiced Harry's thoughts aloud as the seeker's mind reeled.

"D'you think he's told his kids about them?" he asked, sitting on the mountain of cushions. The witch shook her head.

"He's an Order member." She reminded, making the boys' faces fall. "He wouldn't disclose that kind of information to them."

"Only one way to find out." Harry pointed out, refusing to give in. "We'll have to ask them."

The girl nodded reluctantly, toying with a pillow tassel. "It'll have to wait. Kallag's in the hospital, remember? So we'll probably ask them in class tomorrow." She prompted. "Did Voldemort say anything else?" Harry mentally went over the vision again, picking out various thoughts.

"He says he'll send the Death Eaters into the forest to question creatures about the weapons' whereabouts. And he's got spies here."

"Did he say who they were?" Ron queried anxiously.

"No. One's an adult—"

"Snape." Ron rolled his eyes.

"Who is an Order member and a spy for our side, Ron." Hermione pointed out sharply. Ron pursed his jaw, not replying to the witch. "And it could be someone else." Ron lowered his brows.

"Like who? Kenward?" he questioned. "He's too much like Lupin to actually be a dark wizard."

"You never know." The clever Gryffindor retorted. "We also thought Quirrell and Moody were good wizards. Look what happened." The male prefect's face burned red and he opened his mouth to reply angrily when Harry interposed the imminent squabble.

"And the others are students." Hermione crinkled her eyebrows.

"How young?"

"Don't know. He just said they could be trusted."

Ron crossed his arms and scoffed acerbically. "Three guesses who." Harry and Hermione only nodded, returning to gather the pillows. Harry had no doubt in his mind Draco Malfoy was probably spying for Voldemort, as were his henchmen, Crabbe and Goyle.

"We mustn't outright accuse them," Hermione spoke. "Remember what happened in our second year. We thought he was the heir of Slytherin."

"True." Ron halfheartedly agreed. "But what about the others? Zabini, Nott, the Aves students, and the others in the various Defense Associations. What if they're spying?"

"Starbuck detected no ill of them. They're clean." Harry defended tiredly.

"What if they were under the Imperious Curse?" he added, his eyebrow elevated.

"Starbuck can see through all curses and enchantments, Ron." Hermione answered. "So he wouldn't be fooled. We're talking about the Dark Lord versus a Celestial. There's no match."

"A teenaged Celestial." The redhead highlighted. Hermione simply rolled her eyes and followed Harry to the door.

"Even so, Celestials are substantially more powerful than wizards or witches. Voldemort couldn't fool Starbuck's forces." Harry took over, escorting the two out of the room and into the softly lit corridor.

"Anyway, we've got to research these weapons." Hermione ordered determinedly. "The more we know about them, the more we can ensure their safety." The boys agreed, padding quietly to the next corridor.

"If they are hidden here in the school," Ron began, his expression carved into one of deep thought, "then Dumbledore must've placed more wards and spells around them."

"At least enough so a first year can't get through the defenses." Harry put in sarcastically.

"Right, that too." Ron grinned. "And it would do well for him to stay in town this time around." Hermione chewed her bottom lip, regarding her companions.

"I don't think he'd make the same mistake twice."

The red-haired prefect's face fell and his eyes met with Hermione's. "I know Dumbledore's this great wizard and all, Hermione, but even



you have to admit—he may be getting senile. Gone nutters." The witch frowned, shaking her head.

"I meant he wouldn't keep the weapons in the school like our first year." She corrected, smoothing her robes. "It's probably somewhere on the grounds, but not extended past the wards." She hypothesized as they turned the corner.

"Meaning, it could be anywhere around here." Harry summarized, getting an affirming nod from Hermione. "Well, Voldemort's going to send his Death Eaters here to look for it. And if Mystikos has any inkling where the weapons might be exactly—"

"Ah, I've caught you!" a friendly voice disrupted Harry's impending comment. Professor Kenward walked around the next bend, a relieved smile on his face. He wore his clothes in the usual laidback style, his sleeves folded and his tie loosened. The faint blue glow of his necklace could barely be seen. The Gryffindors greeted their professor nervously, hoping he hadn't heard their discussion. "I wanted to catch up to you, Mr. Potter, about the Novice lesson next week." The boy in question nodded, furtively glancing to his friends flanking his sides. Hermione appeared circumspect and wary, while Ron smiled at the man genuinely. Both Gryffindors faced their silent third partner.

"I'll meet you back at the common room." Harry told them. Ron simply nodded and seized the hesitant witch's wrist, dragging her around the curve. Kenward smiled at Harry, his hands lazily in his pockets.

"Right, I know it's late so, I won't keep you." He pulled out a hand to slacken his gray tie even more. The soft blue glow of the necklace was a bit brighter, but still icy cobalt. "You are the head of the three Defense Associations, Harry." The dark-haired Gryffindor shrugged.

"I'd like to think it's more of a triumvirate with me, Hermione, and you, sir." Harry replied, toying with his wand. Kenward raised his thick eyebrows.

"Interesting."

"Very."

"Well, I was consulting with Professor Jace, and he ultimately told me to ask you..." and the defense instructor went on to ask the Boy-Who-Lived if he should begin to teach the Novice group basic shield spells. Harry agreed and the two continued conversation on what other spells would be suitable for the group. During this time, Harry caught his gaze flicking now and then to the radiant cerulean cylinder clinging to the gold chain around his professor's neck. He narrowed his eyes a bit, as he thought the charm blushed brighter every time his emerald eyes fell upon it. When Kenward finally stopped blathering on about protective hexes, Harry's brain couldn't beat his mouth before he blurted it out.

"Professor, d'you know that your trinket changes color?" Kenward's brows sunk slightly, before he pulled the gem into his line of sight. The man's eyes then widened, and he stared at the ornament as if he had never viewed it before. Hastily, he tucked it back in his shirt, an air of nervousness and excitement surrounding the instructor.

Carefully masking his features, the teacher shrugged indifferently, his brown eyes oddly spirited. "Oh, I—I never noticed. I always thought it was just blue." Harry slit his eyes somewhat.

"It's usually golden during class, sir." If possible, the man's eyes were more vivacious—or disbelieving, Harry wasn't sure which.

"Golden?" he repeated, barely containing his voice. "Odd—odd color." There was an awkward span of silence for a few seconds, where the professor glanced everywhere but at his student.

"I've—I've got to head back." Harry gestured, pointing behind his professor nervously.

"Right, right. Thank you, Harry." They expressed their departing remarks and Harry didn't look over his shoulder as Kenward advanced through the corridor.

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Harry stared at the lone comet streaking across the night sky, just barely missing the bright reddish dot. Beside him, Ron turned over in his sleep, drool oozing out of the corner of his mouth, splashing noiselessly to the earthy ground below. Shaking his head, Harry focused on the clunking of hooves a few feet away. Firenze plucked

a leaf from a tree, observing it thoughtfully in the starlight. The raven-haired seeker idly toyed with a lush weed on the forest floor, stroking it every so often between his fingers.

"It is written in the sky," he began in his wise, yet serious tone, "the fortune of our races. For those who can see it." Lavender and Parvati gave each other cheeky grins, and turned to sigh pleasantly and bat their eyes at the blonde centaur. "Humans look for other ways to tell of their futures," the hooved professor started in a tone of deep disagreement. "Yet if they would only look to the heavens, sought answers will be found." The flaxen-haired stargazer clopped across the room, forcing Thanos and Neville to move out of his way. As the half-man, half-horse paused under the pseudo-twilight to turn back to the class, Harry could just make out the seemingly faded, nevertheless visible hoof print on his torso.

He pointed to the red star blinking above the slumbering Ron. "Mars is unusually bright." He uttered the famous phrase Harry had come to find insufferable. The Gryffindor would remember his first time in the Dark Forest when he had spotted the host body of Quirrell, and Firenze came to his rescue. He could not get any answers from the centaur, as he repeated that phrase every other sentence. "Mars signals difficulty. Strife, if you will." He resumed, his striking blue eyes falling on Harry, cutting right through the teenager. "Discord quite inconceivable, you will not return to that which you once were."

Harry tapered his eyes at the insinuation, and Firenze merely broke his gaze with the Gryffindor. He could no longer feel the furry leaves of the weed between his fingers, which were now dry and crumpled. He ignored Firenze's continued lecture. The centaur was talking to him, right? Harry mentally shook himself. What would happen to him so horribly that he'd never be the same?

The sixth year was so caught up in his own thoughts; he did not hear the forest-dwelling creature dismiss the class. Rudely shaking Ron awake, the seeker slung his bag over his shoulder, waiting for his best friend to become aware of his surroundings. Wiping his eyes and the dirt from his face, Ron sleepily hoisted his satchel on his arm and the two followed the crowd out of classroom eleven.

"Good lesson, then?" he hazily questioned, yawning and rubbing his watery eyes. "Didn't disturb my nap once." Offended scoffs were heard from behind them, as outraged Parvati and Lavender pushed

through them to their next class. Harry's mind was elsewhere as he thought over Firenze's warning.

"Yeah," he replied, staring at the bustling students. "Great."

The rest of the day drifted into the night as the Gryffindors continued classes, with one student in particular's mind wandering through possible questions to the centaur's warning. The three friends were sitting by the fire again this evening, this time joined by Ginny and Ella, with a few sixth year students of both genders and houses. Hermione had taken up knitting again, fussing to the others that she hadn't made one hat since she'd arrived.

It was when Harry had just written a sentence on object animations that the portrait entrance opened up, and some commotion was heard. After the noise didn't die down, Hermione, who had done her best to ignore it, huffed angrily and gripped her knitting needles ominously.

"Keep it down, or we'll be down five points!" she threatened, her brown eyes hard. But the students weren't paying attention; a few of the sixth years vaulted from their seats to join the din. The noise level rose considerably before Hermione tossed her tools down and jumped out of her seat. "I said—"

"Sorry, Hermione," a familiar voice apologized. "I didn't know there'd be this much of an uproar." Harry paused in his Transfiguration essay to face the brightly smiling countenance of Kaltag Smythe. With identical beams Hermione and Ginny raced to the Celestial to hug and greet him, while Harry and Ron slapped him on the back.

"Good to see you mate." Ron greeted happily.

"Great to be back, actually." The redheaded Paraffin spoke. Ella had halted her leisure reading to appraise the prefect.

"Rumor had it you were supposed to have been out by tomorrow evening," she pointed out. The Being simply shrugged, sitting with the rest of the group.

"I was supposed to be out Sunday evening," he confessed, "but Madam Pomfrey refused to let me go. She did say I had an

incredibly fast ability to heal." As the Parador adjusted his spectacles, Harry blinked.

"You're wearing glasses." The thin, silver-rimmed oval-shaped glasses were hardly noticeable without the hearth light, with the exception of the shimmering lenses and rims.

"I usually take a remedy for vision that lasts six months." The Being admitted with a smirk. "But Madam Pomfrey had to counteract whatever was done to me, so the potion was cancelled out. Back to glasses, then." The friends conversed all through the night, catching Kaltag up on what was missed, and reviewing great punishment plans for Xenik and Hansen. As the night progressed, the common area emptied of students. The other sixth years had gone in for the night around eleven, while Ginny went up a bit later. Nikola and Starbuck emerged from the portrait to sit with them until Hermione signaled him with a look that it was time to have 'that talk.'

Eyeing the Smythes one by one, Harry licked his lips nervously. "Er...can we...ask you a few questions?" The triplets looked baffled but nodded nonetheless. "Er...well, we know your father is Spiridon Smythe..." Nikola nodded, and narrowed her eyes somewhat. "And from what Hermione has told us, he's the general of the Axial Battalion."

"Right." Starbuck answered. Harry ran his tongue over the back of his teeth, weighing his next comment.

"And Kaltag, you told us there was a madman after your family." The prefect's eyes flickered behind his spectacles, but he nodded. "Named...Mystikos?" The three Smythes stilled, all boring into Harry with their stares.

"You know of him?" Kaltag inquired curiously.

"Well, we think—actually, we know he's allied himself with the dark lord of the wizarding world—"

"Voldemort." Starbuck ended. Out of the six, only Ron flinched.

"You say his name?" he hissed at the Being of Dreams and Fancies. The blonde defiantly nodded.

"He is of no threat to us." Starbuck told the Weasley. "But Mystikos is."

"How do you know?" Nikola asked, running a hand through her fair hair. Harry bit his lip, as did Hermione and Ron. They couldn't tell them about his visions. It would be insanity, not to mention risking their lives also.

"Do you know why they're in alliance?" Ron interrupted, redirecting the line of questioning. The brothers and sister shook their different heads, furrowing their brows.

"A quest for power, no doubt." The eldest suggested. Nikola scoffed disgustedly to herself, falling back roughly into the sofa.

"Dad never tells us business—his own or the Order's...." she immediately regretted her words as her brothers threw her dark looks, and she gasped covering her mouth.

"You know about the Order?" Harry blurted out.

"Of the Phoenix?" Ron added in shock.

"How do you know?" Starbuck and Hermione asked the two groups inquisitively. After looking at one another for a good while, Harry opened his mouth speak.

"Dumbledore. And Ron's parents. You?"

"Mum and dad were part of it ages ago. Dad said he rejoined after the ban was lifted. He explained that it's an organization dedicated to eradicating the evil of the wizarding world." Nikola anxiously explained.

"Do you know anything else?" Hermione delved, leaning on her knees. Combing their minds for any important information, the Paraffins sadly shook their heads.

"We know nothing else. Dad doesn't exactly go around announcing what happens in Order meetings." Kaltag mumbled. Harry quirked his lips to the side, thinking deeply.

"Maybe you can still help us." He offered, smiling at their optimistic and interested faces.

"Anything we can." The ginger-haired boy declared. Fumbling with a loose string on his robe, Harry again reviewed what he was about to spill. Could they be trusted?

"Voldemort and Mystikos have allied themselves to search for weapons." He began, staring into the fire. "From what we've heard, they're powerful enough to destroy and rule over the wizarding—if not the entire world. We just wanted to know if you've heard of them."

"The Sword of Amenophus," Hermione took the reins, "and the Ravenstone Scepter."

"We think they're here, at the school." Ron resumed, his eyes and face set. "But hidden." Nikola and Starbuck's faces fell into confusion.

"Why would they be here?" she queried.

Kaltag raised himself in his seat. "Isn't it obvious?" he spoke in her direction. "Protection. Under the care of the only man who is capable of enough security."

"Dumbledore." Various voices replied. Nikola's eyes brightened in knowledge and she nodded slowly.

"But we've never heard of these weapons," Starbuck confessed with a hint of sadness. "Not once." In pensive silence, Kaltag began to roll the glittering reddish-black sphere on his chain between his fingers.

"No, but there must be something on it in the library." He resolutely stated. "And we'll find it tomorrow."

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Breakfast in the dining hall was its usual boisterous affair, as students conversed about the nearing Halloween Ball. Malfoy, Harry had blissfully noted, looked like he had swallowed a porcupine when Kaltag walked into the hall, blushing furiously from the ovation he

received. Xenik appeared murderous, but masked it under agitation as his rival narrowed his eyes toward him.

"He hasn't been acting so big anymore." Ron made clear to the Celestial. "More like he's lost his favorite house elf." Hermione was further down from the boys with Ginny, Nikola and Ella, speaking about the ball, of course. When the owls poured in during Harry's second helping of bacon, the Gryffindor noticed they were carrying a lot more packages than usual. Some packets were small and looked relatively weightless; others were large and bulky, needing four or more owls to strain their wings. Draco Malfoy's parcel, of course, had five regal eagle owls for his neatly tied, stylish box. Two owls brought Ginny a medium-sized package, as Ron looked her way.

"Fred and George," he answered in a bothered tone, pointing to the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes logo on the side. "They're pranks. But the others...I reckon they're dress robes." Hermes, with a great beam and a high-five to his youngest son, Hiram, placed a fat parcel in Kaltag's lap, racing off to deliver more mail.

"From my father," the spectacled Celestial told the others. "And I think they're the robes." Beside him, Starbuck nodded, swilling his milk. Ron nudged Harry in his side, almost making him spit out his citrus juice.

"Still getting your robes in Hogsmeade?" he asked, forking a sausage from Harry's plate. Nodding and pinching two strips of bacon from the redhead's plate, Harry smirked and answered.

"I think so. I'll try to get it before we visit Snuffles." He replied with a frown. "But remember, we promised to show Kaltag and Starbuck around Hogsmeade. We've probably got to shake them somehow." Ron snorted, swatting a jet-black owl from over his head.

"Yeah, it wouldn't do well for them to come face to face with a mass murderer." Reaching for his goblet, Harry noticed the dark owl dropped two letters before Kaltag and flew off arrogantly. Furrowing his brows in confusion, the prefect opened both letters quickly, frowning as his eyes scanned the correspondents. Tidbits of food from his salver disappeared as Kaltag crumpled the missives and threw them on the plate. Shooting a scathing look at the Slytherin and Aves table, Harry lowered his eyebrows as the Being's eyes swam a fierce orange-red, and the Celestial pointed a finger at the



pair of wrinkled parchments. A small orange jet of fire issued from the redhead's index finger, and the letters were ignited. Seconds later, burned parchment littered the plate, leaving barely recognizable heaps of slightly smoking ashes.

The Gryffindor and the keeper exchanged fleeting glances. "Kaltag?" The ginger-haired student gave the two a calming smile and shrugged. His eyes swerved to the Averin table, where Harry noted a bristling Xenik. The Paraffin prefect narrowed his eyes with a light smirk before answering.

"Junk mail."

ooooo

"Only two? I thought you were renowned for your strength, Daemon." A deep voice sneered. The gray-haired man raised an eyebrow.

"What, am I going to carry two and bounce the third on my knee? Besides, you need to spend more time with him." He gestured at an unseen person. The dark-man's frown deepened.

"I always wondered why they chose me, compared to Potter, Black, and that werewolf." He scowled, glaring at the shaggy taupe carpet. "After all, they're extremely close acquaintances." The salt and pepper haired man paused in his hauling, to look upon the man sympathetically.

"Because they trust you." The younger man scoffed scathingly, twisting around to look out at the sinister sky behind the window.

"But my past—"

"Is exactly that. Past. Gone." The older gentleman interrupted. The shady man's midnight blue eyes became glassy and hard.

"They are still sins that will follow me." He softly countered.

"Sins can be forgiven." The elderly man spoke profoundly. "They have been forgiven. And they are in the past. Leave them there." The dark figure shook his head exasperatedly, rolling his eyes.

"Erastus..."

"Severus, yes, you've killed, tortured, maimed, tap-danced," both men produced small smiles before the wiser noble continued. "But they were done ages ago. I beg you, for me, for yourself...for him . . . . Let it burn." Snape nodded solemnly. Bobbing his head in encouragement, the senior flurried to return to his duty. "We shouldn't be talking about this in front of them." Sighing heavily, Snape turned to face the older man he'd come to view somewhat as a mentor and close friend.

"They'd never remember. They retain memories from age three and up." The mentor nodded slowly, before catching the younger man's eye with a mischievous glint.

"You can only use so many memory charms on a child."

ooooo

Harry started with a jolt, sitting up in bed. What was that? It was definitely not from Voldemort, so it wasn't a vision. It was more like a memory. But who's? Pulling back his hangings and setting his glasses on his nose, Harry glanced around the dormitory; a good number of the Parador boys were missing. Only Ron and Kaltag were still in bed, and it looked like Starbuck was occupying the bathroom. The door closed, and Harry only got a glimpse of Icarus' cloak. Kaltag looked like he, too, had just woken up from a nightmare, and Ron had already swung his legs out of bed. Wiping the light sweat from his face, Harry weighed the reasons why he would have a dream involving Snape, of all people.

"Come on, mates." Ron called. "Hogsmeade." Both boys nodded, slowly leaving their beds. Kaltag ran a hand through his unruly locks of red hair, rubbing his eyes. The night before, Professor Jace had given him the six-month vision tonic at dinner, letting him know his sight would be fully repaired by morning. The Paraffin winced at the bright light.

"Bad dream?" Harry questioned, pushing his own to the back of his mind.

"Not really." He admitted. "Just...odd." Harry nodded forcing back his own nightmare. "We're still on for the Hogsmeade tour, right?" Blinking away his confusion, Harry nodded.

"Y-Yeah," the Gryffindor confirmed. "But Ron and I were actually going to meet Hermione at two. At...Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop." The prefect simply nodded, rolling out of bed to head to the lavatory. Ron glanced at the retreating back of Kaltag, before turning to Harry.

"Good cover, mate." He complimented, taking a seat on Harry's bed. "The last thing we need is them barging in on us and Sirius making new friends."

"Unwanted friends." Harry spoke, rolling his eyes. "Hermione's meeting us at the fence, right?"

"Yes, but there's still the small problem of how we're getting in without attracting much attention." The redheaded chess maestro informed. "The Shrieking Shack is the hotbed for Hogwarts students. I mean, even seventh years still visit it." Harry robotically shrugged his boxy shoulders, buried under Dudley's old pajamas.

"We'll think of something." He barely heard Ron murmur, "we had better," before Starbuck emerged from the bathroom. Quickly Ron and Harry gathered their things together, making final checks on moneybags and matching socks.

After dressing and heading to the Great Hall for breakfast, the boys assembled in the entrance hall, going through the motions of getting cleared by Caretaker Filch. The Celestials from third year and up eagerly clutched their permission forms, hopping on the balls of their feet in excitement. Many Hogwarts older years were also heading into the small wizarding village, more than likely to purchase a few items of clothing for the ball that night. In fact, conversation was at an all time noisy level as the raucous students emptied the school. Hermione and Nikola could barely contain their excitement. Ron shook his head in disgust.

"Girls. I bet they'll leave the village four hours before the ball just to make themselves proper." He scoffed at the thought.

"Well, we don't get many balls, Ron," Neville stated from their left. "They should at least have that time." The Weasley male reluctantly agreed but scowled anyhow.

"But why is it that they have to take four hours to get ready?" he questioned inquiringly, a vast look of perplexity on his face. Kaltag raised an eyebrow, buttoning his robe in the chilly weather.

"Would you rather they take fifteen minutes and come out looking like trolls?" A passing Selene Magnus elbowed the Being in his stomach, flashing the doubled-over Paraffin a roguish grin. Harry covered his guffaws with throaty coughs, his emerald orbs twinkling in mirth.

"Too...right." Starbuck justified between chortles. Massaging his aching side, the Being frowned at his friends and brother, following them into the windy village. Students with various cloak hues overran the picturesque parish of Hogsmeade, with its store windows decked in subtle Halloween garlands. Harry noticed, with a disgusted stomach flip, that many students were heading into Madam Puddifoot's for tea or coffee. Among the couples were of course, Cho Chang and Michael Corner.

Ron and Harry guided the Smythe boys to the post office to view the exotic array of owls; Dervish and Banges, the wizarding equipment shop was the next stop; the four enjoyed their time at Zonko's Joke Shop, stocking up on Dungbombs and Stink Pellets. Starbuck purchased a few elegant quills from Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, while the Parador quartet loaded their arms with countless products from Honeyduke's. The sweet store was more packed than normal, with barely enough room to move one's elbows.

Harry bought several sugar quills and Jelly Slugs for himself, along with nougats, creams, and Fizzing Whizbees. He had to constantly remind himself he was also here in town to buy a robe for the ball, so as not to squander his Galleons on sweets.

"This reminds me of Clio's Confections in Aristedes Square," Starbuck clarified, examining the Acid Pops. "And Sweets of Sisyphus." His elder brother nodded, smiling at the clerk behind the counter.

"What I wouldn't do for a cider at Bacchus' right now..." he replied longingly. "Or a Medusa Ten-Tacular Sweet." Squeezing out of the store with their purchases, the boys glanced down the road before Harry spoke.

"I'm headed to Gladrags for a cloak. Meet you at The Three Broomsticks in twenty?" Kaltag and Starbuck let out derisive laughs.

"You'll need more time for that, Harry." Ron spoke, steering the others to the town saloon. Scowling at their retreating backs, Harry headed in the direction of the wizardwear shop, praying silently to himself that he can just find a cloak and get out. As he neared the shop, he noticed many students entering and leaving with brown boxes wrapped in twine. After several violently orange-cloaked students poured out, Harry followed in a fifth year Voltaire with a chiming bell, viewing the store interestedly.

Gladrags was like Madam Malkin's, with displays and racks of robes of all types, only the Hogsmeade area also sold day by day items, such as elegant blouses, dragon hide boots, and Dobby's favorite, socks. The filmy window and racks displayed dusty Halloween ornaments; though Harry thought they would be more intimidating if they were cleaned. Only a lone Hufflepuff was examining a polka-dotted chartreuse and lavender pair of socks, while everyone else stormed the cloak stands.

In the corner, a fourth year Ravenclaw and a fifth year Brittlebore were fighting over a hideous puke-colored cloak; a few Paraffins males hung in the corner with a store clerk, studying weatherproof robes; Harry watched as a teary-eyed Hufflepuff complain to a young store worker that the red cloak in her hands is what she wore when her Ravenclaw boyfriend broke off their relationship. He didn't notice when a tall, middle-aged, skeletal woman with a monocle and gray attire approached him. Her hair was untamed, stating that she had had an exhausting morning with the rowdy bunch of students.

"How-how may I help you, young sir?" she asked, firmly trying to end her wavering tone. The Gryffindor eyed her in sympathy, twisting his Honeyduke's bag and thinking of the tiger mask in his trunk.

"Er..." His eyes followed the brawl between the girls disputing over the cloak, as they had just missed bumping into Justin Finch-Fletchley. "I am looking for...a, uh . . . ."

"Cloak?" she finished, wincing at the sound of splintering wood. "For the ball?" Nodding quickly, Harry decided to enlighten the poor woman. She pulled out her wand and flicked it at him, a magical measuring tape appearing in thin air and fussing over the Gryffindor. "Specifications?"

"I need something of a dark gray, but not black." He described, extending his arms and legs for the tape. "Do you think you might have that?" The woman wrinkled her brows, as deep lines of thought materialized on her pasty face.

"Would you like any specifics done to said cloak? Protective charms, anti-wrinkling, self-adjustment—in case you happen to grow—or element repellent?" she listed, her eyes bulging at the growls from students and the tinkling bell from an entering customer. When the teenager shook his head, the woman sighed, removing her monocle to polish it on her aged dress. "Particular fabric favorites?" With another firm shake of his head, the woman seized the measuring tape and assured she would be back as she nipped into the rear. A sour-faced man was now escorting the fighting girls from the store, and Harry could now see the store was emptying. After a gaggle of seventh years entered, the thin woman returned, carrying several boxes in hand. Without introduction, she plopped the boxes on the floor, uncovered the top and pulled it out.

"Slate velvet." She stated, holding the drab gray robe under Harry's nose. Scrunching his face in revulsion, the Boy-Who-Lived watched the woman dump the robe in the box, toss it aside and pull out another. "Dark Gray silk." Nice, but again, dull. Harry didn't utter a word as the woman read his eyes and the robe received the same fate as the first. Yanking out the third box, the middle-aged female pulled out a shimmering satin cloak, with silver Celtic knots along the edge. Harry stared at the on-the-shoulder cloak, with a silver clasp shaped like a dagger. And what was perfect is that it matched the dark stripes from his mask (from what he could remember). "Black pearl satin."

"I'll take it, ma'am." He swiftly declared before she could chuck it away too. With a startled expression, the witch nodded, folding the

robe neatly and closing the box. Harry walked out of the store nearly ten minutes after he walked in; his new cloak tucked under his arm and his moneybag light a few Galleons.

Needless to say, the boys back at The Three Broomsticks were impressed Harry had come back in record time. Ron had asked to see the cloak, but Harry shooed him away, promising to let him see it later. Hermione, Nikola and Ginny arrived moments later, all glowing and swinging Honeyduke's and Gladrags purchases. Starbuck and Kaltag went to Madam Rosmerta to get their drinks, while the girls spoke about the dance.

Harry and Ron kept to themselves, examining the Fouler, a beautiful rose, which squirted rank skunk fluid, under the dim light. As the boys shot out of the path of the liquid, Hermione frowned deeply.

"You aren't planning to give that to me, are you?" she pointedly asked Ron, her date for the ball. The prefect's eyes widened and he shook his head.

"No. I could never do that to you, Hermione." His ears flushed as he spoke, and a smile tugged at his lips. Hermione's cheeks reddened, and she smiled.

"You had better not, Ronald Weasley." Nikola excused herself and left their table, pointing to where Endymion and Isis were sitting in a dim corner across the tavern. Hermione glanced around them to make sure no one was in hearing range. "The Shrieking Shack has been occupied all day. Students are turning up at every moment." Harry sighed in defeat. Why did Sirius insist on meeting today of all days? Halloween?

"Well, how are we doing this?" Harry questioned. "Starbuck and Kaltag think we're going to meet you at Scrivenshaft's." Biting her bottom lip, Hermione wallowed in thought.

"Snuffles is expecting us at two." Ron proposed. "So what can we do to keep students away from the Shack?" Ginny piped in with a great beam.

"Didn't you hear?" she asked, rolling her eyes at their shaking heads. "There was a notice put up for visitors and villagers. All visits toward the Shrieking Shack are closed by one o'clock. It is Halloween. And

they are superstitious." Smiling widely, the trio complimented the youngest Weasley, and she smirked as Harry called her a 'genius' and a 'lifesaver.'

The Smythe siblings returned with the seven bottles of butterbeer, handing them out individually. The Beings and Entity commented on how beautiful the village was, compared to their airy Aristedes Square. Harry was also stunned to hear that the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes of Hogsmeade was being built beside Madam Puddifoot's café, a place he and most boys in general seek to ignore. Ginny left as she spotted Luna, reminding Harry they would meet in the common room thirty minutes to eight.

Four butterbeers and dozens of laughs later, the six found themselves outside under the white, cloudless sky, looking toward the far mountain. Hermione eyed the Gryffindors furtively before faking a smile and clapping her hands together.

"Well, we're just going to the quill shop for my order," she lied, nudging the redheaded keeper in his side. Sharply glancing toward the Celestials, Ron reddened.

"Oh, ah, yes, Hermione. Let's just...go there, eh?" He chimed in with an equally big smile. The Smythes looked vaguely suspicious of the three, but brushed it off. Clinging to their purchases, the three nodded.

"Are you sure you don't want us to join you?" Nikola asked once more, her brown eyes alight with worry. The trio shook their heads, backing away slowly.

"No. We're just going for quills, is all." Hermione assured, waving them away. "We'll meet back at the school then." With hasty departing words, the Gryffindors turned down the crowded High Street slipping through the raucous students and leaving the Smythe siblings in front of the tavern. Ron let out a deep breath, swinging his Honeyduke's and Zonko's bags at his side.

"Think they bought it?"

"I hope." Harry commented turning back to make sure the Celestial Paraffins were far behind. "Now all we need is a plan to get into the Shack unnoticed."



But Hermione, with a superior smirk on her face, led the wizards onto the footpath. She eyed Ron's Zonko's bag and grinned. "I'm guessing you two stocked up on those awful practical jokes of yours?" Ron looked affronted that the witch had offended his gags.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Hand one over." She ordered as they neared the edge of the village.

"What?"

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing." She promised, and grinned triumphantly when Ron reluctantly withdrew a Dungbomb. Harry scrunched his face in disgust as the witch examined the prank.

"What are you up to, Hermione?" They slipped past a group of Celestials and Slytherins as Hermione quietly guided them to the side of an old, ramshackle shop. Crouching low behind the building, Harry could just see the Shrieking Shack in the distance near the forest. Biting her lip, Hermione pulled out her wand, tapped the Dungbomb muttering a few hexes, and tossed it toward the crowd of students. Immediately, the gag exploded, releasing billows and billows of inky smoke and a disgusting odor of rotten eggs. Cries of disgust and anger rang out as students and residents alike cleared the area, racing back toward the center of town.

"Come on!" Hermione urged, trotting toward the haunted hovel artfully. Ron was trying to hold in his laughter as the Dungbomb terrorized the town. Several students and residents tried to weave through the smoke to put the offending joke out, but whatever the Gryffindor had done to it, only served to issue more smoke and stench. The Weasley student looked impressed at his Halloween Ball escort, standing tall.

"I never knew you had it in you." He jerked a thumb at the village behind them, overrun with black smoke. The clever witch merely shrugged, grinning cheekily to her friends. Harry hoisted the Gladrags box and his other sacks of Hogsmeade products under his arm, sloping up the slight hill. His black hair was now wilder than usual, with dark tresses irking his eyes. Wiping away his hair, the Gryffindor faltered in his steps as his eyes narrowed. He was sure he had just seen movement in the forest. A slight wind blew the

mangled branches of the forest toward them, forcing the witch to tighten her robes. Harry paused as he witnessed a swish of black deep in the forest, and heard the snapping of twigs and faintly stamping hooves. Ahead, Ron and Hermione stopped, watching their famous friend anxiously.

"Harry?" Hermione called out tentatively. "Are you all right?" The boy in question thinned his eyes into slits, waiting and listening for movement once more. After seeing none after a minute of keen observation, Harry faced his anxious friends.

"Thought I heard something." He revealed, climbing the hill. He shuddered slightly in thought, presupposing it must have been Hagrid's 'little' brother, Grawp the giant. "Remember Sirius isn't to know that we know about the weapons. The strict prefect frowned, gazing at her friend in disagreement.

"I still think we should tell him."

"Yeah, and I think we should tell Snape to wash his hair, but we won't, will we?" Ron pointed out mockingly. Hermione kept silent but peeved, pulling out her wand. After Hermione's Severing Spell on the barbed wire fence, the three crossed the fetid garden of the Shrieking Shack, their faces set in revulsion.

"Sirius sure can pick 'em." Ron spoke, kicking away a moldy watering can. Hermione uttered the Door Unlocking Spell, and the three entered, Hermione closing and locking the door after the boys came in. The shack was dustier and more decayed as it was three years ago when they came to rescue Ron. Tattered sheets were covered with thick grime, and floorboards were gray with filth. The house groaned on its own, making Hermione jump and grab the nearest wizard—Ron—who then colored and smiled nervously at the ruddy-cheeked witch.

Harry was the first to test the stairs, ascending slowly with his friends at his heels. Surprisingly, the steps didn't creak one bit, despite the dilapidated appearance of the house. They were still as sturdy as ever. Reaching the landing, the trio glanced to the open door of the room they had first met the escaped convict face to face in. Crossing the threshold quietly, the students took in the broken furniture, ragged sheets, and moth-eaten drapes barring the light from view. On the grubby four (now three)-poster sat a jet-black,

bear-like hound, which lifted his head as the three Gryffindors entered. A grin broke Harry's face and his shoulders relaxed.

"Sirius." The Animagus wagged his tail and reverted back to his human form, squeezing Harry in his arms. The seeker could barely breathe in the air-constricting embrace, sighing in relief when he felt his arms free.

Sirius beamed at his godson, his gaunt, unsoiled face brightening. "Harry! So good to see you! And Ron and Hermione as well!" Hermione hugged Sirius as Ron shook the Marauder's hand, stowing their purchases to the side.

"How have you been?" Harry asked his godfather, who frowned at the boy.

"I should be asking how you are, Harry." He chided with a playful smirk. "I am well. How has the old school been?"

"Brilliant!" Ron answered. "We won our first Quidditch match." Sirius congratulated the two players and went on with conversation.

"And classes?"

"Extremely well." Hermione piped in with a polite grin. "Although work is overwhelming, more so than last year. But I expect next year to be even worse." Ron winced at Hermione's prediction, curling his lip in disgust.

"Snape is being his normal horrible self this year." He enlightened, missing Harry's slight flinch at the man's name. The dream he had last night was tucked in the far reaches of his mind until his best friend had brought up the man's name. "But it's been loads better since Professor Jace." The house creaked once more as Sirius paced before the teenagers purposefully. "And Divination is much better, now that we don't have Trelawney hovering over us all the time." Sirius threw Harry a clandestine glance before his eyes wandered to their possessions.

"Gladrags, Harry?" he questioned with an amused tone. Harry's eyes widened slightly in realization. He hadn't told Sirius of the ball.

"Er...Halloween Ball tonight." He disclosed. Sirius's eyes looked mildly hurt. "Forgot to tell you, with all this commotion going 'round." The thin descendant of the Black house nodded, resuming his pacing.

"Don't think they had one of those for years," he expressed in deep thought. "The last I heard was in 1871." Harry faced his godfather with a confused countenance.

"How do you know that?" The escaped innocent gestured frivolously.

"Word of mouth." Hermione chewed her lip and crossed her arms fretfully.

"What are you doing here, Sirius?" she questioned. The man in query looked at the clever witch askance, his grayish-blue eyes flickering in puzzlement.

"What do you mean, Hermione?" The Gryffindor prefect contracted her folded arms and stood to full height.

"Why risk getting yourself captured just to say hello to Harry?" She motioned to the somewhat irked Boy-Who-Lived. "Why not just send a letter? If we're found here with you, we'd also be thrown in Azkaban, you know."

"Oh, lighten up, Hermione!" Ron scowled. "You don't think Sirius has taken many precautions in ensuring his and our safety?" The Muggle-born simply raised an eyebrow and frowned.

"You know Sirius does many impulsive and reckless things," she explained. Both Sirius and Harry's eyes flew into their black fringes.

"He's standing in the room, Hermione," the convict reminded with a slightly iced tone. The girl turned to the man in sympathy as the house creaked. "I would never harm Harry or you or Ron intentionally."

"Sirius would never do that!" Harry defended in full annoyance.

"I know, but he can't keep risking visits like he usually does." She proffered. "Especially now, what with the Celestials all over the place. One of them could probably pick up your presence."

"Aiding and abetting, are we?"

The four turned in shock at the fifth voice, the students' faces drained of color. Starbuck, Kaltag and Nikola stood in the doorway, their hands curled in fists on their hips, and their faces stony. Harry's hand immediately went to hover over his wand. Why didn't they lock the house properly?

"Kaltag!" Ron exclaimed. "Starbuck, Nikola, what are you—how did you...?"

Hermione calmly advanced toward them. "We can explain." She soothingly stated. Nikola's blonde eyebrow rose and she crossed her arms threateningly on her chest.

"I'll bet." Harry narrowed his eyes.

"How long have you been associating with a known, hardened criminal?" Starbuck hissed, his brown eyes alight with an unseen fire.

"Did you follow us here?" Harry challenged. Kaltag slit his azure eyes.

"Yes," he admitted. "We did." Ron scoffed near Sirius shaking his head.

"You two and Hermione said you were heading for Scrivenshaft's. Then we see you three slinking off suspiciously—"

"Very suspiciously." Nikola threw in.

"—From the same place where the Dungbomb was thrown." Kaltag concluded. "During all the commotion, we go to look for you three, and where do we see you scampering off to?" Ron made a noise at the verb 'scampering.' "Only the most dangerous and haunted place this side of the UK." Hermione looked overwhelmed, her white face paling at the Paraffin prefect's words.

"You didn't think we'd follow you?" Starbuck added slightly hurt.

"We're three cats who have been on curiosity's Most Wanted list for years. We sure aren't stopping now that we're in a new place." The

eldest Smythe son complacently clarified, crossing his arms. Harry slipped his hand in his robes, gripping his wand. Behind him, Sirius let out a barking laughter ringing through the hushed room, wiping his eyes of the forming tears. The Gryffindor Trio turned to the convict baffled and slightly wary. The Smythes merely raised their brows. Shaking his head in deep amusement, Sirius beamed.

"Too like your father, you are." He declared.

Nikola rolled her eyes and smirked. "Give us some credit. We've got a bit of mum in us, too." Harry's hand dropped from inside of his robe as the Entity skipped to Sirius, embracing him warmly. She, however, didn't notice the Animagus flinch at her super strength. Ron, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, eyed the three Celestials in mystification.

"Uh...is anyone else here lost?" Starbuck and Kaltag firmly shook Sirius' hand, taking their places beside the Gryffindor. Ron slowly blinked at a blank space on the hardwood and grimy floor.

"How do you know Sirius?" Hermione questioned warily.

"I spent sometime with them during the summer, at their home." The convict responded.

"In Greece?" Harry spoke out. Sirius smirked teasingly.

"Where else?" Harry tapered his eyes at his godfather, watching as his best friends and the siblings held a conversation with Sirius. Why was he with the Smythes during the summer? Did they already know about the weapons? Sirius playfully ruffled the boys' hair.

"About this ball business." He addressed the room at large. "Is it simply a costumed affair?"

"Masquerade is the theme." Starbuck answered. "We're just looking for dress robes or accessories to compliment them."

"Ah," the older wizard scratched his goateed chin. "Well, enjoy the night, then." The Paradors expressed the goodbyes to Sirius, letting Harry alone with his godfather. They clomped down the stairwell, their voices fading onto the ground floor. "So." Sirius began, leaning on the bedpost.

"You spent time with them during the summer?" The teenager asked, picking his items up.

"Yes." The man answered honestly. "Spiridon and I are...old friends." Harry couldn't pause himself.

"Order business?"

"Always is." He replied quickly. The Gryffindor knew it was pointless to ask what the business was truly about. "It was also more of a vacation from being 'on the run.'" The boy nodded, grinning at a memory.

"Last I read, you were in Fiji." He commented in mirth. Sirius guffawed, clapping the boy on his shoulder. The wizard retreated a bit, staring Harry in his emerald eyes unseeingly.

"My," he started with a sad smile. "You're growing up." Harry was practically Sirius' height, yet no taller than the towering Ron. Squeezing his godson's shoulder gently, the Animagus smiled proudly. "Enjoy the ball, Harry. I do hope you have a lovely young lady to escort?" The seeker blushed profoundly, finding interest in the dirty floor.

"Ginny." Sirius's eyes widened slightly, before he smirked.

"Good luck with that."

The six cautiously crept out of the back door of the shack, eyeing their surroundings cagily. When all the Paradors were out, the sextet plodded to the quaint village of Hogsmeade. Harry's eyes found their way to the swaying trees of the forest, the wind sweeping through his hair. He hadn't witnessed any more movement than last time, and clutched his boxed cloak tighter. Starbuck narrowed his eyes at the forest, occasionally flicking his gaze along the forest's edge.

"Well, that was unexpected." Ron confessed.

"Yeah," Nikola chipped in. "I never thought I'd meet another person who associates with known convicts."

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The sixth year boys' dormitory was in a fanatical state as they dipped in and out of the lavatory in their dress robes. Ron was muttering several Smoothing Out charms on his navy robes, while Neville was adjusting his furry eyewear in the mirror. Brothers Smythe were debating whether Kaltag should wear his cloak hood up or down, while Icarus, being the jester he feigned, stood by in amusement.

Harry was busy staring clearly at his reflection in another mirror, genuinely smiling. His glasses were safely in his trunk, cushioned by knickers and socks. Kaltag had performed a twelve-hour vision spell on his eyes, enabling him to be free of the round-rimmed glasses for the night. The teenager swore his eyes glowed in the lavatory torches, enhancing his entire façade. His satin cloak glistened in the light, fitting snugly over his white shirt and gray trousers. Harry's tiger mask was clasped in his sweaty digits, the emeralds in the corner of his eyes glittering. Ron walked into the lavatory, mask in hand, and decked from head to toe in navy. Harry impressively appraised him, smirking at the cheeky grin on his best friend's face.

"Nice cloak, Harry." The youngest male Weasley commented.

"Likewise." As Ron lifted the comb and brush to style his hair, Harry apprehensively looked at his own messy mane. Though it was still short and modish, the trim was getting stale. Thanos and Yorick entered (Thanos clanking in chain metal) as Neville nodded successfully and exited. The Being of Harvest pulled out a massive jar of a translucent, viscous substance, unscrewing the lid; both Beings dove their hands in the jar, swiping massive handfuls in their locks.

"Sleekeazy's." Ron stated in awe. "I've heard that's good." The Beings commented lazily, styling their hair accordingly.

"Feel free to use some, then," Yorick offered. "I've got a whole other tub in me trunk." The Gryffindors expressed their gratitude, taking small amounts in their palms. Ron tried mimicking Thanos' upward motions in his hair, making the front pointed, but the back curled slightly; Yorick made sure his curly hair remained so, hardening the curls. Thanos swept his hair into its typical military fashion, all straight and at attention. And Harry, fearful of what he would concoct, followed in Ron and Thanos' motions, pointing his locks in different



directions, but keeping it in its natural, untidy form. His father would be proud, he mused.

The four left the bathroom to let the others have their way. It seemed as if the brothers had settled their deliberation; Kaltag's hood was up, and his eyes were oddly glowing bright blue. His robe was a sweeping crushed indigo, matching his mysterious mask; he wore a silk indigo shirt with a sapphire vest and velvet gloves. Along the edge of his graceful hood, boxy Greek squares decorated the rim. Starbuck was in plain black, his feathery mask in the shape of a bird's eyes and beak. The Paraffin prefect took down his hood and set his mask on his forehead, grinning at the Gryffindors.

"Let's off, mates. It's almost time." Agreeing, the three prefects, Harry and Starbuck descended the steps and left their other seven roommates in a mass hysteria. Reaching the full common room, the boys noticed many couples exiting the portrait hole and other Paradors hanging around the fire. Harry was pleased and excited that his spectacles no longer hindered his face; he could see everything clearly and sharply. Icarus left to meet his rendezvous, leaving the others to wait for theirs. Ron was toying with his mask of Anubis, scowling.

"They've been up there a good three hours." He complained to the girls' staircase. Harry noticed quite a few of the Paradors in the lounge were in fact male, most likely waiting on their female better halves. Seven thirty was nearing, and Harry's stomach had turned on him. Why was he so nervous? Its just Ginny. It wasn't like they didn't know each other. After a few fourth years came Parvati and Lavender festooned and bejeweled in frilly, vivid fuchsia masks and robes, and wide pompous smiles on their faces. The sixth year Gryffindor boys smirked to themselves, glancing at each other.

"What are you then, pink doxies?" Ron cheekily questioned, earning heated glares from the girls. They stifled their laughter as the two departed their company. Endymion came next, smiling dazzlingly at them and leaving the common room without a word.

"Heard she's going with Roger Davies." Starbuck reported. Kaltag merely grunted in response. Neville stumbled down, falling into the strong grips of Harry and Kaltag with his bright pink face muttering apologies. Thanos followed in his wake, leaning casually on the wall with his helmet and mask on his head, ready to be pulled down.

Next came Circe in brilliant pink and red, linking her arm with Starbuck's, and Isis in glittery pastel green, leaving with her date, Neville. Nikola, in her bronze warrior maiden garb, merrily waited with complimenting Thanos. As the number in the common room started to dwindle, Harry's heart leapt in his throat at the next set of ladies.

Ginny led Hermione and Ella down the steps, the three smiling nervously at their companions. Ron stiffened beside Harry, his face coloring a perfect shade of rose, his unblinking eyes set on Hermione.

The youngest Weasley was astonishing in pure white robes and a dress, her red hair in tight curls around her equally red face. A crystal and diamond encrusted facial façade rested over her nose, sparkling intensely in the hearth light. As she came closer, Harry made out a small, tilted golden halo in the center on the mask.

"An angel. Perfect." Harry whispered aloud. The fifth year giggled, fooling around with Harry's robe.

"I'll say." She replied. "Oh, you've gotten rid of your glasses. Your eyes are brilliant." Harry flushed and mumbled a thank you. Ron beamed proudly at his little sister.

"Be especially good to her mate," he warned. "Or Fred and George's pranks'll be put to good use."

Hermione wore an airy mauve cloak, her ornately engraved silver mask bringing out her chocolate eyes. Her hair was no longer bushy, but pooled in soft curls at her shoulders.

"Beautiful." Was the only coherent word Ron spoke. Ella beamed at Kaltag, her leafy mask enhancing her eyes. Her jade cloak looked otherworldly, with its leaf embroidery over her shoulders and trimming her cloak.

"You look...exquisite." Kaltag remarked. "Extremely beautiful." The unsolved Gryffindor smiled, returning the comments to her date. Harry hadn't seen when Kaltag produced an ivory lily and handed it to the witch, but he didn't miss the reddening of the Celestial's cheeks when the sixth year witch kissed his cheek.

"Don't get any ideas." Ginny chided humorously, eyeing the red-haired couple with a smile. "This is only the first date." Harry connected their arms comfortably with a laugh. Ron was busily praising Hermione's appearance, while she helped him into his pointy-eared mask.

"With your brother so close by?" he motioned to the cheerfully chatting Ron and Hermione behind them. "I think not." The five couples departed the common room, gleefully gabbing about the dance tonight.

"D'you think the Weird Sisters'll be there?" Ginny queried, running a hand through her fiery locks.

"Dunno." Harry slipped on his white tiger mask, adjusting to the view. Following Starbuck and Circe to the Great Hall, the boy's stomach flipped oddly. A sense of dread and worry filled him.

"Great mask, Harry." Ginny complimented, running her fingers over the ivory and black pearl stripes. "It matches your robe flawlessly. Are you up for much dancing tonight?" When the frowning boy didn't answer, the redheaded girl smirked. "Okay, we won't do much dancing, then."

"No," he corrected. "It isn't that. I just...feel something is amiss." He rubbed his stomach through his clothing. "That something might happen." He was confused by the snort Ginny gave him.

"It's Halloween, Harry." She answered. "Of course something is going to happen." They turned the corner and headed down the stairs. "Wouldn't be a Hogwarts Halloween if anything didn't." Though the uneasiness didn't settle, Harry gave Ginny a small smile, and nodded.

"You're right." Couples and a handful of embarrassed singles rallied in the entrance hall, waiting for the doors of the Great Hall to open. Harry and Ginny observed more than a few noteworthy outfits, including Yorick's forest-like theme, and Luna's supposed Heliopath getup. Draco Malfoy was bedecked in tip-to-tip dragon hide, his scaly evergreen mask and equally scaled cloak, pants and boots alike. Beside him was not Pansy Parkinson, but Aves Faryn Dufresne, in a fluffy white cloak and mask. If she was trying to pull

off being an angel, she certainly failed, being the twisted, malevolent Entity that she was. Xenik, in plain black with a silver mask (Harry assumed it was the Muggle Phantom of the Opera premise), accompanied frilly purple Pansy, who Ginny deduced was a mermaid. Dark colors or plain black seemed to be the color of the evening, since Crabbe and Goyle were dressed in regular black robes and basic disguises.

Kaltag had his hood and mask on, standing near Harry and Ginny, and Hermione could be heard lecturing Ron on the possible charms on the Great Hall for this year.

"What's with the switch?" Ron interrupted Hermione's sermon on Expansion Charms. He motioned to Malfoy and the others along the front doors of the hall. "Ferret and Dogface are never separated." The gathering crowd of noisy and brightly decorated students parted to allow Professors McGonagall, Thetis, Sprout and Hoshi through. McGonagall seemed to wear her usual robes, only carrying her tartan mask on a thin rod. Only when the teachers walked through did Harry spot Cho and Michael in identical green robes.

Finally, the doors opened at eight o'clock sharp, to awed exclamations and gasps. The Great Hall had rid itself of the lengthy meal tables, and instead was replaced with round ten-seat slabs covered in black tablecloths with ginger overlays. Black and orange candles bobbed in the air, illuminating the hall in a gloomy mood. Like the Yule Ball in his fourth year, a space was cleared out in the center of the large hall to serve as the ball floor. Large pumpkins sat as a centerpiece for each table, with animated bats flapping their wings on the jack-o-lantern's heads. Hagrid's thick, thestral-sized pumpkins were lined along the edge of the room, illumining the floor. A few tables, Harry noticed, had skulls with elaborate witch hats for showpieces, which most of the Slytherins and Aves took.

"Blimey," Ron muttered in awe. "They've really done it this time." Animated bats dove from the moonlit enchanted ceiling, circling the heads of the students.

"If everyone one would please take their seats." The voice of the headmaster boomed from the front. The octet took the nearest table, which happened to be between Cho's and Michael's, and the sixth year Averins. Harry nervously pulled out Ginny's chair for her (as

Kaltag had done for Ella), and Ron and Starbuck seemed to take their cue. When the hullabaloo of pupils settled down, Harry was a bit put out to notice Dumbledore only wore a robe with grinning pumpkins and fruit bats. Every teacher was present, with the 'unforeseen' exception of Trelawney; even Firenze was in attendance, squeezed between Hagrid and Kenward. McGonagall took her place beside Dumbledore and from a distance, Harry could see the man's eyes twinkling.

"Welcome to this year's Masquerade Ball." A tumult of applause and cheering broke out, making the headmaster beam. "I must say you all look exceptionally marvelous in costume tonight. And I am sure you all worked very hard on your attire. So far the year has been wonderful; every student here has worked hard in these trying times. As a gift, we present to you a night of magic, wonder, and merriment for your memories for years to come. Enjoy tonight's festivities with food and celebration!" The old wizard waved his hand during the second round of applause, and yellowed menus appeared on every table.

Plucking the parchments off of the tables, the group studied their options carefully. Harry assumed the menu was much like his fourth year Yule Ball's menu, and he made his decision.

"Roast chicken!" he stated. Immediately, a full meal appeared, complete with smoking beverage. Hesitantly clasping the billowing goblet in his clutches, Harry inhaled the frothy drink and took a sink. As warmth spread through his body, the Gryffindor nodded. "Butterbeer." The table of Paradors removed their façades unlike the hall at large, to contentedly eat the feast. The pumpkin on their table began slowly pouring out ominous smoke, while the eight teens conversed pleasantly.

"Did you know," Hermione began in her usual instructing tone, "that Halloween was a Muggle holiday?" Ron rolled his eyes as Hermione went on with the explanation about the induction of the celebration.

"So, Ginny," Ella began, slicing her steak primly, "how has fifth year been?" The female Weasley exasperatedly clattered her silverware on her plate heaving a dramatic breath.

"Tiring," she answered, taking up her fork and knife. "I'd really hate to fail my O.W.L.s with all this work I've been doing."

"Yeah," Harry joined in. "It's a tough year." The Gryffindor chaser blew a red lock out of her eyes.

"Now you tell me." Harry smirked impishly.

"You never asked."

"You could've warned me about Snape." She pointed out, sipping her butterbeer liberally.

"Hey, you're on your own with him." Harry surrendered. "He practically failed me all of last year."

"If Snape had his way, he'd fail every Gryffindor." Ron joined, scowling. The Slytherins and Aves were busy in their own deep conversation to notice they were sitting by the Paradors. Pansy and Draco were seated next to each other this time, but Faryn was fawning over him on his other side.

"Now, you're not being reasonable, Ron." Hermione scolded, evenly carving into her veal. "Snape must be impartial to everyone."

"Newsflash, Hermione," a new accent came into the conversation. "He isn't." Selene Magnus stood by her suitor, Slytherin Theodore Nott.

"Thank you for the insight, Selene." Kaltag responded sarcastically. "Theodore." The Slytherin inclined his head kindly. "A bit early in the meal for visiting, isn't it?" The Voltaire Entity waved him off, nicking a noodle from his salver.

"Just looking for Endy. Thought she said she wanted to go with you." She exposed. Kaltag appeared somewhat piqued.

"Well, I'm happily taken." He introduced Ella to Selene. The Entity and her escort wandered to another table, in search of the Entity of Planets. Harry humorously observed Starbuck and Circe as they fended off slaving wizards and Beings, asking Circe for a grain of rice from her salver. Others went as far as to ask her for the first dance or to dump Starbuck. It was as he watched the males lining up to get a glimpse of the Entity of Love, he wondered about a burning question.

"Hey, Starbuck," he whispered as Circe turned down another offer from a desperate seventh year. "How come I'm immune to Circe?" he glanced at Ron. "How come Ron and I are immune to her?"

"Well, after you get to know her, hang around her for a while, you get used to her. The magnetism of love and attraction dies down greatly." He explained, circling the table back to his companion.

After he and Ginny shared a large slab of frosted Cauldron Cake, Dumbledore signaled the hall to rise to their feet. Harry and the others hastily pulled on their theatrical masks, setting their apparel in order.

With a wave his wizened hand, the plates and utensils disappeared, and a table of butterbeer bottles and pastries appeared along a far wall. A small dais was erected toward the front, and Harry could see a set of instruments appearing.

"Goodness, is that you, Potter?" a drawling voice rang out. Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head before facing the Slytherin. Cho and Michael also caught wind of Malfoy's words, making the couple turn to their table as well. Cho's eyes hardened as she spotted Ginny's hand resting on Harry's elbow. The dragon hide-clad boy walked with his spotless alabaster queen to invade the Paradors' space. Malfoy assessed the glaring Ginny, quirking an eyebrow.

Harry was surprised—and relieved—he held no bad comments for her and Hermione.

As he eyed Ella and Circe he tsked in pity.

"Pity your beauty has to be exhausted on beasts." He motioned to the brothers with a sneer. He scrunched his face in disgust at their costumes. "A kitty, a dog, and two flobberworms." He summarized. Crabbe and Goyle flanked the Averin pair's side, chuckling stupidly. "Silly costumes for silly Mudblood lovers." The boys and girls glared daggers at the girlishly tittering Faryn and smirking Malfoy.

"And who're you?" Ron threw back derisively. "Gilderoy Lockhart? Did you happen to slay the dragon you're wearing, too?" he spoke in a measured babying tone. The Paradors laughed at the Slytherin's angered expression.

"I don't think so, Ron." Kaltag disagreed with an argumentative voice. "I think he patched up Faryn's flaking scales and made himself a cloak." Faryn's beautifully deadly face contorted in horrid annoyance and she hissed at the prefect.

It was at that time the band entered to tumultuous applause, all decked in strange, craftily torn robes and dark shades. From the looks of the relatively normal instruments, they weren't the Weird Sisters.

"Pallas Admes," Circe answered the unasked query. "I love this band." Malfoy and Dufresne shuffled away with dateless Crabbe and Goyle, while Xenik and Pansy gave the group wide berth, simply glaring at their existence. Circe ticked off the members of Pallas Admes (lead vocalist and guitarist Tik Tao, guitarist and bassist Trykx and Myx, and drummer Styx) while the quartet began a moderately paced song. Everyone at the table had already taken to the dance floor, leaving Harry and Ginny by themselves. Rolling on the balls of his feet nervously, Harry faced Ginny, tapping her toes to the melody.

"Want to dance?" he asked. Nodding, Ginny took Harry's hand (he was glad he was wearing a mask) and the two danced to the beat of the song. Numbers of teachers were already pacing through the crowds, warily eyeing the students. Harry spun Ginny around, making sure to keep the beat of the song. It wasn't everyday that he danced. In fact, it wasn't ever that he danced.

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The evening wore on, with Harry and Ginny taking short breaks after many jigs on the polished Great Hall floor. Ginny was quite a dancer; she had complimented him on his skills, even though he admitted this was the second time he had ever danced. To which Ginny smugly grinned and corrected, "Publicly."

The two had viewed many more interesting events through the night; Circe garnered quite a gathering of younger and older boys—all with seething, angry dates. At one point, Endymion Magnus sulked in the corner when Roger mindlessly staggered in the trail of the Entity. One of the highlights of the night was Professor Jace's elaborate costume. The remedies instructor wore black, billowing robes, and a



stark white mask, completing his ensemble with an oily black wig. When he crossed paths with Harry, Kaltag, Ginny and Ella, he simply stated in a bored tone, "I'm Professor Severus Snape. I live to suck the fun out of everything."

Of course, Snape found techniques to suffer through the night, too. He chopped points off of all houses that weren't associated with his own for scant reasons. Harry swore he deducted five points for his robe being too gray. Currently, the potions master was scowling at a Hufflepuff and a Ravenclaw; by the looks on the students' faces, they had done something to irk the potions professor. Then again, it didn't take much to annoy him.

"Bartles and Levinson, your costumes clearly are not those of Dementors." He sneered. "Please refrain from vulgar public displays of affection." The nearby Averin popularity quartet leered as their head of house retreated, poking fun at the caught pair. Their laughs were short-lived as someone (Harry presumed it was a sixth year Parador—namely, Icarus) lobbed one of Fred and George's Fudge Firecrackers at the four. Needless to say, the four were peeved at the humiliation; even Pallas Admes paused to cackle at the Averins. Unfortunately, scowling Snape and Einar made quick work of the mess. The foul smells, however, did not dissipate from the dour-faced Slytherins and Aves.

All in all, Harry was having a grand time with Ginny. They spoke on topics such as classes, Yule holidays, and Ginny's favorite, new pranks. Even Ron and Hermione weren't bickering for once, but laughing in full while dancing; Kaltag and Ella were exceptionally friendly, mischievously dancing and chatting. At thirty minutes to ten, it seemed like Ginny's notion was false; nothing could ruin this evening.

An unnerving stirring in his abdomen made Harry understand that he probably spoke too soon.

The green-eyed wizard had just joined Kaltag and Ella for a sociable discussion on the night so far when a somewhat disoriented Starbuck approached the group. Seconds earlier, Circe had gone to help her younger brother Philo rid himself of toadying girls. His brown eyes nervously jerked to the boogieing multitude of students, jiggling their worldly cares away.

The Being of Dreams and Fancies massaged his head frantically, his eyes jumping between to his peers and his brother. Kaltag quickly ended his discussion with Ella, his attention completely on his semi-panting sibling.

"What?" he queried, grasping his blonde sibling's shoulder. "Starbuck?" The teenager panted, furiously eyeing the bopping children and narrowing his eyes.

"Thoughts," he uttered over the music. "I'm sensing thoughts...murderous thoughts." Kaltag's face drained of all color under his dark mask, and his blue topaz eyes flicked to the throng.

"Do you know whose?" he inquired, attempting to focus his brother. Hermione and Ron halted their dancing to make inquiries about Starbuck's behavior.

"What's happening?" Ron asked, a pink-faced Hermione beside him.

"Starbuck, he's sensing some homicidal thoughts," Harry murmured so only they can hear, despite the boisterous tune. He quickly pulled off his feline mask and stowed it away.

"I sensed something earlier today, but I didn't—I didn't know what it was." He admitted to his older fraternal twin. "I didn't think it would be this intense. It wasn't like this before!"

"Calm down, Buck," Kaltag soothed, watching those around their circle charily. "Just focus. Like Chiron taught us. Focus." The Celestial fenzler took deep, consoling breaths, closing his eyes. Harry shifted nervously by the brothers.

"How do we know who it is? And is there anything we can do?" he asked of the eldest Smythe child. Kaltag sadly shook his head.

"Not unless Starbuck can tell us anything."

"We should warn the teachers." Hermione suggested.

"I don't think they would believe Starbuck," Ginny spoke. "To them, it'll be a joke."

"Ginny's right, Hermione," Ella supported. "What if nothing happens? Then we'd get in trouble." Hermione seemed vulnerable, her eyes admitting defeat.

"When he comes up with something, we can act." Ron pledged. The seven friends looked to the focusing Being for guidance, carefully blocking out the noisy guitar riff of the band. Slowly, Starbuck's eyes opened, holding knowledge and wisdom behind it with familiarity.

Starbuck gripped his head, scanning the camouflaged faces of dancing students, oblivious to the potential emergency around them. Kaltag helplessly looked over the jiggling group, locking eyes with his brother.

"Anything?" he urgently asked. Starbuck's brown eyes smoldered bright brown, feebly taking in the teenagers around him.

"I can't tell who." He weakly stated, his glowing eyes surveying the students. Harry exhaled sharply, rubbing his scar. When he felt nothing, not a tingle, he fell confused. If it wasn't Voldemort, who was it? The teachers were busy conversing amongst each other, chatting gaily and laughing politely. Firenze was close by, supervising a nearby Ravenclaw group. Hermione and Ron gripped each other's arms, looking about the crowd. Ginny instinctively pulled Harry's arm into her embrace, her brown eyes also searching the horde of Hogwarts and Aripedes pupils. Suddenly, Starbuck's eyes swung to the closed double doors, his eyes wide and shining.

"There!" he pointed to the massive entry. Without warning, the doors burst open, banging the wall so hard it rebounded. Dumbledore and the teachers were on full alert, their wands rigid and aimed at the doors. The soft clapping of hooves and a dragging of a smooth surface on stone echoed through the dead silent and still hall, as the students momentarily stopped dancing, and Pallas Admes paused their playing. Tik Tao's guitar screech faded into nothingness, and the Celestial pulled down his dark shades a notch to eye their guests. Firenze, out of sheer curiosity and what seemed like fear, tread softly behind the Paradors, the dull hoof print on his torso more profound in the candlelight. His blue eyes widened as he beheld the intruders.

In tramped Bane, the wild-looking black centaur from the forbidden forest, along with the chestnut-bodied centaur called Magorian, and

dozen-odd centaurs. All were armed with quiverfuls of sharp arrows. Some even had their bows ready in hand, taking aim. Low shrieks and gasps were heard from the students; Ginny seized Harry's arm firmly.

"Somehow, I don't think this is part of the ball." She whispered in a fearful tone.

Bane was breathing sharply, his human chest heaving and foamy-white saliva pooling on the edges of his jaws. In his fist, he raised an object to show the hall at large. Harry's eyes widened as Bane tossed the large, furry gray object to the ground. Gulping, he recognized it.

It was Ronan the centaur. Dead.

Bane roared, deeply, his fist clenched and raised at the enchanted ceiling, vibrating under his bellow. Firenze stared at the body of the lifeless centaur at Bane's hooves, Ronan's eyes staring listlessly at him accusingly. Quite suddenly, Bane brought his massive hand down, pointing at the crowd. The students swayed scarily, backing to the safety of the stage.

When Bane spoke, it was low, threatening, and deadly. "Which one of you was it?" His tone was icy; he meant business. "Which one of you frail, wretched excuses of wasted life did this!" He gestured harshly at Ronan, making Susan Bones gasp and tremble. Dumbledore was already at the end of the hall, a good several feet away from the armed and dangerous creatures.

"I am sorry for your loss," he bowed deeply in respect to the herd, his wand missing. "But I must inquire as to what business you have here." McGonagall and Snape were directly behind him, their wands hidden in the folds of their robes. Harry estimated they were merely fifteen or so feet from the angry mob. His group of friends was a measly eight or ten feet from the equipped creatures. Bane reared on his hind legs, stomping his hooves down crossly.

"You know of our business!" he shouted. "Your executioner knows of our business!" Dumbledore peacefully lowered his thick snowy eyebrows in bewilderment. Magorian vigilantly let his bow and arrow sink, clip clapping to his associate's side.

"Albus Dumbledore," he greeted coldly. "Famed wizard of the ages. I ask you calmly and peaceably to hand over the criminal." Harry swallowed, his eyes widening. Did they think Sirius was here? Is that who they were after? Ron and Hermione stealthily glanced in his direction, questioning him with their eyes. The headmaster tilted his head to the side.

"I am befuddled, good sir." He admitted. Magorian tensed as Bane growled deeply. "Perhaps we should talk more privately in my office." Firenze secretively slipped at an angle toward his old herd, forcing the might of the pack to flex their muscles and aim their arrows at him threateningly. Magorian's hostile orbs pierced through the benevolent wizard.

"Do not play your obstreperous human diversions with us." He frostily stated. The centaurs were incredibly tall; the point of Dumbledore's hat barely brushed their hairy chins. Magorian gradually leaned over the defeater of Grindelwald. "Hand over Ronan's executioner, Albus Dumbledore." As calmly and rationally as his old age would permit him, Dumbledore shook his head.

"Again good sirs, I've no notion of what you are referring to." Bane irately hissed, pounding his salver-sized hooves into the ground.

"It was one of your foals!" he roared, jabbing a finger at the quivering group of dancers. "We know that much!"

"Brother Ronan lies dead at our hooves and you cannot hand over his eradicator." Magorian declared wrathfully. McGonagall and Snape both tightened their grips on their wands as the chestnut centaur directed an arrow at the headmaster. "The stars have spoken, Albus Dumbledore. You will fail." The headmaster did not recoil, only staring coolly at the stargazers. Kaltag and Harry caught each other's gazes, worriedly eyeing the old man.

"Perchance we should continue this conversation in my office," he offered benignly. "I trust you will—"

"ENOUGH!" Bane hollered, his black body glistening in the torchlight. He exhaled hot air through his nostrils and turned on Firenze. "Slave of humans! In bondage!" he insulted, spitting spitefully at his former comrade's hooves. "A foal encroached onto our refuge! Killing our true brother!" he grunted, withdrawing a sharp, black and bronze

arrow, and loading his bow. "Probably sent by you, traitor! Resentful that we barred you from our drove for treason!" Harry felt sorry for Firenze and the death of Ronan, but he couldn't let the others kill his professor. The divining creature more than likely had nothing to do with the centaur's death. He felt something swell inside him as Bane advanced toward Firenze in a fury. Dumbledore or the others would never make it on time.

"NO!"

Before he realized he had moved, Harry found himself inches from a jagged, razor-sharp arrow, and at Kaltag's side. Both boys were between Firenze and certain death.

Bane's black eyes glittered in rage, and his teeth were bared, spit oozing from the corners of his mouth. The centaur tautened his hold on the weapon, glowering at the teenagers. "You." He hissed at Harry.

"You've no right to do this." The Boy-Who-Lived reproached. A ways behind him Ginny inhaled a frightened breath.

"I do not take orders from man-foals!" he snarled. "Stand aside!" But the teenaged Paradors held their ground. Snape shifted uneasily beside McGonagall, his control on his wand wavering. Bane squinted his eyes at Harry, then Kaltag. The Celestial narrowed his eyes venomously, glaring daggers at the crazed beast, Magorian slanted his head at the students, slowly lowering his weapon. Harry's eyes were steadfast on the centaur before him, but he heard the others putting their weapons aside. Bane didn't seem to care about his herd, as Kaltag and Harry raised their chests in defiance, the arrow's point hovering between them. Unexpectedly, the black centaur's eyes flickered strangely, and he narrowed his eyes even more between the two different sets of eyes, before they widened slightly. Bane gently lowered his bow, closing his salivating mouth, and standing proudly, yet reverently. He inclined his head reverentially, his bow at his side.

"As you wish." He quietly responded.

Without a backward glance, the raven creature seized the centaur corpse and hooves clamored out of the hall. When the last of the centaurs exited, McGonagall and Snape snapped out of their

reveries, following in their wake. The two threw their students odd looks, bordering astonished and to Harry's surprise, caution. Kaltag expelled a deep breath beside Harry breaking him out of his stupor. The hall was in a dead, stunned silence, wide eyes staring at the boys as if they themselves were creatures. Keeping their eyes on the Great Hall ground, the two seekers made their way back to their taciturn friends, gawking at the two in shock.

"Harry...Kaltag...?" Hermione breathed, barely audible to anyone but those inches away from her. Firenze, who remained dead frozen in his position, held the boys in his gaze surprisingly. Dumbledore, who was amazingly regarding the boys in pensiveness, clapped his hands together to grab the staring hall's interest.

"Students, if you will please return to your dormitories in alacrity. And teachers convene in the teacher's sitting room posthaste. I bid you good rest." He commanded. Reluctantly, the Celestials and wizards and witches obeyed, quickly racing out of the hall. Harry and Kaltag avoided their blatant stares, choosing instead to occupy themselves with their friends. Nikola and Thanos rushed over, but said nothing. The intent looks intensified as they spilled out of the Great Hall, a few professors guiding them out. Harry and company quickly tagged onto a mass of excitedly chatting Hufflebores, who turned at regular intervals to eye the boys.

"You all right, mates?" Ron finally spoke, his tone hoarse and forced. Harry numbly nodded, allowing the warmth of Ginny's arm linked to his guide him back to the safety of the tower. Ahead, Kaltag's hood was up, and he and Ella were speaking in very quiet intonations.

"Interesting night to say the least." Ginny endeavored to lighten the mood. She nudged the Gryffindor in his ribs, briefly resting her head on his shoulder. "This a normal enough Halloween for you, Harry?" she questioned. Harry sincerely smiled, despite the reflections of the last ten minutes.

"In true Hogwarts fashion." He replied.

"Happy Halloween, Harry."

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A/N: Revised chapter.

## Chapter Fifteen: Quod Erat Demonstrandum (Thus It Is Proven)

Ron groaned angrily, slamming the thick, dusty tome down. He immediately recoiled when both Hermione and the passing Madam Pince shot him a nasty look.

"Nothing." He grumbled, gently pushing the book aside under Hermione's piercing glare. Harry gave his best friend an apologetic glance, also closing his book to pick up a Celestial text to thumb through. His perusal through the index of the book was cut short as he noticed a few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws staring warily at him. They quietly whispered amongst their small coterie, also eyeing the redheaded Being across from Ron. Peeved, Harry glowered at the wizards and witches, his lip curling upward in disgust. Widening their eyes in fright, the faction scurried away, shooting cautious glances over their shoulders. All Harry could do was sigh deeply; he had hoped everyone had forgotten about the odd Halloween Ball that had passed. But he and the Paraffin prefect were still receiving weird looks, some even from their close friends.

There were times during Studies in Divination where Ron would glance guardedly at Harry before masking his face in a reluctant smile. Hermione often studied him while they were working in the common room, squinting her eyes and returning to assiduously scribble her essay. Even the professors seemed to be giving him wide berth, save Snape and Kenward. Harry was taken aback with everyone's behavior and response; they looked to him for answers he couldn't even formulate. He had no idea what made wild Bane back off, as well as the other centaurs, but the Gryffindor believed, if anything, the solution resided with the Paraffin that was sitting beside him.

"...R'...'R'...maybe I should try under 'S.'" Ron murmured flipping through another book before closing it. "We're not finding anything." Ron carped, crossing his arms. "I'm beginning to think this was all a joke." Hermione paused her quill over her parchment, narrowing her brown eyes at her fellow prefect.

"When have Harry's visions ever been a hoax?" Harry could tell as soon as the words escaped her mouth, she regretted saying them. She slowly faced the seeker, her glistening eyes repentant and her teeth chewing her bottom lip. Harry merely turned away and grunted, picking up his books and stowing them in his bag. Swinging the bag



over his shoulder, he surveyed the three sitting at the table. "Harry...it—well, it could have been, I mean...." Hermione began pitifully.

"I know it wasn't a hoax." He bristled, glaring at his best friend. Hermione had the impudence to look somewhat ashamed, but resolute in her remark. "Voldemort wouldn't go to such lengths to elaborate a joke, Hermione." Ron flinched slightly at the name, but regarded his dorm mate. "He wasn't as detailed last year, was he?" He hissed, turning on his heel to exit the library and leaving no thought of Hermione's expression. As he passed the stack of erstwhile newspapers, Madam Pince was swooping down on him as he exited, but feeling too annoyed to bother, Harry ignored her, leaving his friends behind.

The Gryffindor shouldered his satchel in a tight grip, glaring at the flickering torches along the empty corridor. The aged walls danced his shadow mockingly as he thudded back to the common room in pensiveness. Of course Hermione had to bring his fifth year back into the limelight. Harry wasn't feeling quite so different now than he had last year; anger coursed through his veins as he remembered everything in the last year: Mr. Weasley in Voldemort's crossfire, the false vision, the Department of Mysteries, the prophecy...

Harry sighed to himself as his scar tingled. Why did it have to be him? Did someone in the clouds blatantly hate him enough to burden him so? Allowing his parents to be killed, forcing him to live with relatives that hate everything he is. Is this how he was condemned to live? Was this why he was chosen? Surely nothing good could come out of his struggles. As he rounded the corner, Harry's anger abated somewhat as he met a familiar affable face.

"Hullo, Harry." Neville greeted with a polite smile. Harry sincerely returned the smile to his round-faced housemate. Out of everyone he knew—whom in some way or another alienated him since Halloween night—Neville (and Ginny) hadn't flinched one bit. The forgetful boy wasn't fazed by what happened that night; unlike Ron and Hermione, his eyes didn't hold any suspicion or discomfiture. He could honestly say Neville was strangely in the same boat as he and Kaltag for some reason.

"Hey, Neville." He replied, his tone a bit downcast than he would have liked it to be. "What's that?" he gestured to the tufty green and

mustard-leafed plant with yellow bell-shaped blossoms in the Gryffindor's hands. The absentminded sixth year proudly smiled at his vegetation, holding it satisfyingly under Harry's nose.

"Bell-Curved Sentiments," he stated, eyeing Harry's odd look. "I'm tending them for Professor Sprout. A free-time project." Harry nodded, remembering that Herbology was indeed Neville's strongest subject. The two strolled leisurely to the next corridor while Neville counted the three blossoms and four buds on the plant.

"Er...what exactly are the functions of Sentiments?" Harry questioned, keeping conversation.

"Oh, they're used in potions to counteract most mood-altering tonics," he lectured, his hand quivering slightly as he mentioned potions, "but mostly they're for enjoyment. They're a mood determinant." He pointed to a vivid canary yellow flower. "Yellow is for contentment, happiness." Regarding Harry's stiff nod, Neville shoved the pot in the unsuspecting seeker's hands. "Go on, see what your mood is." The green-eyed male stared at the plant neutrally, watching as the bright yellow deepened into a murky burgundy. Neville's grin faltered, and Harry could tell the determined answer wasn't a cheerful one.

"Neville?"

"Ah," he began in slight disappointment. "Claret. Anger." Harry lowered his brows at the foliage as two buds blossomed into deep maroon blooms.

Handing the plant back to his friend, Harry's eyes failed to meet Neville's as he stared at the ornate runner. "Yeah, Hermione and I got into a sort of row." The bulbs altered into a bland blue color in the sixth year's chubby hands.

The plump boy nodded silently, gripping the clay pot in his hands. "Oh." He responded in a tone of mild wonderment. "I see." The blossoms blushed pale mustard after the boy spoke.

"Transfiguration essay." He lied. The meek Gryffindor nodded again, and the two continued their trek to the tower.

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Thursday dawned on Hogwarts School, bleak and damp, with a healthy November shower spraying the jade lawns of the grounds. Harry was starting to become more than a bit bothered by the stares he was receiving; what's more, he was somewhat irritated with Kaltag, as the boy seemingly shrugged them off. Inwardly, Harry knew he should have also ignored his curious peers, but for some reason or another, sitting unbothered by their rude looks was the last proposition on his mind. He had had enough this past week.

Sunday, he had made the mistake of publicly attending breakfast in the Great Hall, rather than cower in his four-poster from the prior night's aftermath. Bacteria could have gurgled anywhere in the enormous dining area and it would have been louder than a Quidditch commentator as he entered the hall with Ron and Kaltag in tow. Every eye was fixed on him or his Celestial friend as they paused in the doorway of the Great Hall. Quietly the three made their way to their usual seats, discounting the measured looks they were receiving.

Malfoy and company enjoyed ridiculing them in Herbology Monday afternoon, ignobly reenacting the event. Hermione forcibly instructed the Gryffindor to calm down, as Harry already had a thick clay pot in hand, prepared to launch it at the cackling Averins. Professor Sprout and Professor Dianthe, the Aripedes Olympic Floras instructor, soon realized what the green-eyed boy was set to do and deducted ten points from Parador.

Tuesday had been Harry's altercation with Hermione in the library (which neither had spoken to each other since), and Wednesday, a group of Slytherins flocked to the Quidditch Pitch in the torrential shower to taunt Harry and the Gryffindor team during practice. Needless to say, it was extremely difficult for the chasers not to lob the quaffle at them. And the beaters Kirke and Linwood had enough trouble doubling back from thwacking the bludgers toward the jeering Serpent House.

Frankly, Harry was not about to suffer another day of this.

"What are you looking at?" he spat curtly at a group of Hufflepuff fourth years approaching him. Stabbing his steaming sausages with his fork, Harry's face locked in anger as the three raced away.

Across from him, Hermione buried her head further in her N.E.W.T. Potions book, her lips thinning into a pink line. Kaltag's blue eyes appraised Harry, and his eyebrows furrowed.

"Perhaps you should rein in your anger, Harry," he suggested calmly, stirring his oatmeal. "They were probably inquiring about tonight's Intermediate gathering." Harry heatedly faced the Paraffin, his emerald eyes brimming with aggravation.

"And?" The Being's face wavered and he stared at the black-haired teenager in perplexity.

"And...what?" he queried. "You can't exactly help out the group with your temper." The Gryffindor seeker prickled. "Besides, I don't think it's fair to take it out on them, or us." Ron shifted at Harry's side, causing Hermione to briefly glance upward. Though Harry knew the Celestial prefect was correct, it only succeeded in making him more upset. Who was the Perfect Paraffin Prefect to give him advice on his attitude?

"What do you know, anyway?" he hissed, shooting green-eyed daggers at the Celestial. Kaltag's eyes swam in a mixture of hurt and anger, before he abruptly stood from the table and left. Harry huffed in displeasure, turning to contently maim the array of breakfast meats on his salver. Minutes later, Hermione and Ron stood, following the Celestial out the door. He was in no rush. Their first class was Snape's, anyway. Today, Jace was assisting Professor Chiron in class again, so the Paradors wouldn't be protected as normal. When the hall began to empty, Harry dropped his utensils on his golden dish, leaving the mess of foods behind. His stomach growled in hunger, as he hadn't eaten anything since he entered.

As he slung his sack over his shoulder, a blur of red and another round shape rushed to his side. Ginny grinned lightly at Harry, though he suspected she was not happy with his manners. Neville took his place beside Harry, walking with the two out of the Great Hall. As Ginny continued to walk with them, Harry furrowed his brows, relenting his anger for a moment.

"Don't you have another class to get to?" he questioned the youngest Weasley. Ginny shrugged, running a pink hand through her hair.

"I can accompany you for a stretch, can't I?" her tone left nothing to be challenged, and her fierce russet eyes paused on him.

"How very...altruistic...of you." He replied cagily. The fifth year simply grinned and waved goodbye, turning down the defense corridor. The two sixth years cut through a rowdy collection of Brittlebores who quieted at Harry's approach. Harry suddenly became aware of the fact that Neville wasn't in N.E.W.T. Potions. A part of him resented the fact the rotund Gryffindor thought he needed a caretaker, but he didn't want to lose the company. Neville didn't utter a word as they made it to the dungeons and pulled open the wooden slab of door.

"I'm off, then." He spoke with a kind smile, patting Harry on the back. The messy-haired boy brusquely nodded and entered without his companion. He suddenly halted at the unexpected sight at his regular worktable. Kaltag and Ron were there as usual, only Kaltag was in Harry's regular seat, and Hermione had filled the space where Ron normally sat. Harry could feel his face burning in irritation, glowering holes in the back of the Celestial's head. He roughly took the empty seat between Icarus and Lavender, irately yanking out his Potions book. Icarus swerved out of the way of Harry's wayward elbow, whistling in an amused tone.

"What's eating you, Potter?" he questioned, helping Harry—blinded by frustration—set up his cauldron. The sixth year didn't answer, instead focusing on the sweeping sound of Professor Snape's cloak as he glided into the room. The sallow man's face was contorted in its customary displeased expression as he overlooked the group.

"Essays. My desk. Now." There was a flurry of sound as the students charged to pull out their essays and rush to the potion master's desk, placing their scrolls down with trepidation. Harry brushed past his friends, his elbow accidentally connecting with Kaltag's arm. The Being merely threw him an irked look and retook his seat. As the commotion died down, Snape barked orders to them to work with their tables to brew a complex, five-day Poison Cleansing Concoction. Lavender, Icarus, and Harry quickly went to work, Harry ignoring Hermione's commanding voice from behind them.

The class progressed slowly as the brewing was getting to its climax, with several groups intensely peering over the brim of their cauldrons. Even Malfoy and Xenik's attentions were on their potion rather than on Harry. A few tables away, Crabbe, Bulstrode, and Erik Hansen's mixture was emitting orange sparks and a thick, green substance was oozing over the cauldron's top. A few Brittlebores and Hufflepuffs were attempting to contain their boiling and shrilly whistling mess. After Snape had vanished the Hufflebores' blend and made them start over, the intolerant professor stalked through the rows, commenting on poorly crafted remedies, and turning his nose upward at the fair ones that weren't of Slytherin or Aves.

Harry, Lavender, and Icarus' potion was quite well. Despite being thought of as somewhat inept at Potions, Lavender knew quite a bit of background on the ingredients and had a great memory. Icarus was already intelligent, so brewing wasn't a hard science. The trio's potion was nearly done when Snape loomed over them, his hooked nose dripping with sweat and his hair even greasier. His dark eyes squinted at the contents of the three separate cauldrons, all one ingredient short of the day's final list. The rest would be added over the five-day period. Lavender quaked slightly beside him as Icarus stiffened. Behind them, Harry could hear Hermione explaining to Ron the advantages and disadvantages of an ingredient. Snape hovered over Harry's cauldron for quite some time, and he flitted his gaze upward frequently (and warily) at the Boy-Who-Lived.

Righting himself, the instructor clasped his hands together behind his back and leveled his gaze with his most defiant student's. "Clearly, Potter, you've been sneaking instructions from Miss Granger or Mr. Smythe," he spoke acidly, the corners of his lips twitching. "Can you not do the work for yourself for once?" Harry narrowed his eyes, causing Snape to raise an eyebrow.

"No," he answered honestly. Had the situation not been so tense, he would have smirked at Snape's disbelief at his truthfulness. "You obviously designated us to work in groups. I was working with Lavender and Icarus. You're not a man who goes back on his word, are you, sir?" The dark-eyed man's lip trembled in loathing as he scoffed.

"Collect your things and follow me, Potter." He hissed acerbically. Harry stood his ground, shaking his head.

"Now, if I do that, I ruin the potion." He explained, pointing to a spot-riddled page in his potions tome. "It says on page two-eighty-four, if it's taken off the fire before the allotted ten-minute boil, it'll spoil." He gazed into the antipathetic orbs of Dumbledore's trusted confidant. "Surely you know this, being a master of potions, and all." By now, every eye was on Harry; Crabbe, Bulstrode, and Hansen's potion had overflowed, covering their area in a viscous, green matter. Harry could see Snape's top lip shudder in the deepest dislike as every word left his dull pink lips. Snape's mouth widened to deal out harsh words before he was interrupted.

"We didn't say anything to him, sir." Kaltag confessed, a profound humbleness in his tone. "Neither Hermione or I." Harry's mood swung from smug to rage in less than a second. Who was he to vouch for him?

"Stay out of this, Kaltag." He snarled, whipping around to glare at his fellow sixth year.

"Sorry if I didn't want my name dragged into it, Harry." He hissed, crossing his arms and his azure eyes holding his glower. In the front of the room, Aves Marieke Demas and Faryn Dufresne eyed each other shrewdly, sinister smirks emerging on their white faces.

"Oh, right, virtuous Saint Smythe, always sticking his honker where it doesn't belong." He spited, mimicking the Being's posture. Had Harry been paying attention, he would have noticed the Averins gleefully grinning to themselves; Snape looked somewhat disturbed and unhappy with the atrocious behavior. Ron and Hermione glanced between their best friend and their new acquaintance, the confusion and torment of choosing a side clearly written on their baffled countenances.

"Coming from you of all people, that's saying something." The boy countered, his eyes now glowing vibrant cobalt. Harry's lip quirked in repulsion and he pushed his stool out of the way to stand inches away from Kaltag's face.

"The beloved Being with the treasured trust fund and an empire under his knickers," he growled. "What do you know anyway?"

"That is enough," Snape interceded, crossing his arms threateningly. The Gryffindor sixth year confronted his instructor with a frown and ruddy cheeks, his fists white from absently gripping his robes tightly. "Ten points from Parador for that ridiculous conduct." He swept away as the boys huffed in disapproval. "And detention for you, Potter, since you took the liberty to entertain the class under your arrogant ideals." Harry masked his emotions from Icarus and Lavender, removing his cauldron from the fire and bottling it for next class. After Snape gave him a hardened look, the professor dismissed the class, with Harry the first one out the door.

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Defense Against the Dark Arts was also tremendously overwrought, and Harry had the sneaking suspicion Professor Kenward could tell. Harry scribbled trivially on a spare bit of parchment as he sat toward the middle of the room between Neville and Yorick. Kenward frequently rolled his wide, drooping sleeves up his arms and continued his explanation on the Contusion Hex. Harry was keen to use this on an opponent, just to vent his frustrations.

Hermione budged in her rapid note taking to plead with the burdened boy with her eyes, but Harry disregarded her. After all, she sat with Ron and Kaltag at the boys' usual table, with the Paraffin seeker facing dead forward, his eyes never leaving pacing body. He didn't feel like forgiving them anytime soon. What they needed clemency for, the young wizard wasn't sure he cared. Harry had just punctured the stick figure's face in his parchment when Kenward's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Anyone up for a duel?" he suggested, leaning on his desk. "Come on, just a pair of you." Neville lowered himself in his seat, knitting his hands together. Yorick suddenly found interest in the wooden school desk. If it were us, Harry mused about the companions in the front he was arguing with, we'd have already jumped at the chance.

"I'll do it, Professor Kenward."

Speak of the imbecile.

Of course, the choice was obvious. Ron would have only jumped at the prospect of dueling if Harry had expressed an interest in doing it.



Kaltag, he frowned, would have done it regardless, to show off his prowess. To upstage me, Harry thought furiously to himself.

He hastily plastered a smirk on his face, standing between the cringing Paradors. "I'll take a whack at him, sir." The paling face of Hermione and the indignant look on Kaltag was all the fuel he needed to continue his gamble. Kenward beamed, inclining his head at Harry.

"Ah, that's the spirit! Mr. Smythe, and Mr. Potter, up to the platform, then!" Harry purposefully made his way through the aisle, watching Kaltag reluctantly push his chair in and grope his pockets for his wand. The class whispered to each other, commenting questioningly or jeering lazily about the boys.

"Ooh." A female Slytherin scornfully urged.

"Nothing I like better than a Gryffindor bloodbath." Draco Malfoy drawled in a low enough tone for Harry to heed. Taking his place at the center of the dais, Harry wrinkled his nose as Kaltag smoothed out his robes and placed it on his chair, his startling orbs falling short of meeting his. Kenward placed his hand on both boys' shoulder for reassurance, but withdrew them quickly after their eyes finally met. Misunderstanding raced across his features before he cleared his throat.

"Now boys," he started, gaining their attention, "you both know duel regulations. When one is incapacitated, the other is the victor. If you can't go on, the other wins. You two know the drill: no Unforgivables, or illegal Dark Arts spells in this duel. I don't have to remind you, utilization of such exploits will result in an immediate trip to your respective headmasters." He held their gazes for a moment before lowering his brows curiously. Harry could feel his magic buzzing, waiting to exact revenge on the Celestial pain-in-the-rear. "Understood?"

"Crystal."

"Yes, sir." Kenward forced them to shake hands (a quick disgruntling feat for the young men), and turned them back to back with wands ready. After ten paces to their opposite sides, both boys assumed the position. The class pushed their desks back somewhat and the

teacher warded them with a protection charm. Hermione was seen biting her quill nervously and looking at Ron in apprehension.

"On my mark." Kenward firmly ordered. His eyebrows were thick slants above his eyes as he stared at the unflinching stances of the boys. Kaltag's eyes were sharp and wintry, considering the icy glare Harry stabbed him with. "Three...two...one!"

"Expelliarmus!"

"Impedimenta!"

Both boys dodged the spells hurtling in their direction; Harry ducked down as the spell singed the ends of his hair, and Kaltag rolled out of the way, landing on his feet when the spell blasted a dent into the stone wall. It was apparent which boy was in better shape, as Kaltag was quickest to recover.

"Stupefy!"

But Harry had been dueling for a good while longer than the Celestial.

"Protego!" He had blocked the spell, letting it dissipate in the blue shield. "Furnunculus!" Kaltag hopped out of the way, kneeling with his wand pointed at Harry. He muttered something under his breath sounding remotely of a foreign language, causing a yellow spell to fly toward Harry. Spinning out of the way, Harry growled at the Being. The class was gasping in awe and commenting on the boys' performance. Kenward looked to be silently criticizing the pair, biting his fist in contemplation.

"Locomotor mortis!" Harry aimed, missing his target by a few inches. Kaltag bared his teeth, throwing a Conjunctivitis Curse at the Boy-Who-Lived, who ducked just in time. By now, Hermione was gripping the desk in fretfulness, clawing marks in the old set. In answer to Kaltag's Stunning Spell, Harry twirled his wand and aimed with purpose.

"Diffindo!" he succeeded in ripping a giant gash through Kaltag's sweater. And from the biting look Kaltag had thrown at him, something in Harry stirred. This is where their anger had led them.

As Kaltag exhaled a sharp breath and aimed his wand dead center, Harry could tell the duel had just begun.

The boys began throwing rash curses, jinxes, and hexes in each other's direction, either to throw the other off or to think of another spell to issue. Seven minutes into the duel, Harry realized just how fit Kaltag was: it was a mere Binding Charm Harry had lobbed the boy's way, expecting him to simply step out of the way, but of course Kaltag did not do things as expected. He executed a series of flips and tumbles leaving the wizards and witches amazed and the Celestials murmuring about how using Chiron's agility training in a duel could be a great advantage.

Harry felt a mild tingling in his left arm as his Hex Deflector Shield wasn't enough for the Being's Numbing Spell. The tingling succeeded in keeping the wizard annoyed, following his random spell tossing. The class remained enthralled as the boys continued, matching wit for wit, spell for spell, and will for will. If it were allowed, both would have continued all day, but as it was, Harry was growing bothered with the fact Kaltag was matching him. After his Bat-Bogey Hex, Harry devised a plan. Kaltag mumbled another foreign spell, forcing Harry to jump out of the way and perform his spell.

"Impedimenta! Obtero!" he shouted in quick succession. As he expected, the Being rapidly got out of the direction of the first; he was struck by the red spell on his side, but still stood. Harry smirked; it was the Contusion Hex Kenward was teaching them today. He was somewhat surprised when Kaltag's blue eyes met his emerald ones, full of hurt and disbelief that he would use the spell on him. The Gryffindor was regretful of what he had done—or rather, what he had caused, for them to be in this situation.

When did I become so vengeful?

As the Being stood in a way to support his bruised body, Harry eyed him apologetically; Kaltag's orbs were glowing bright cerulean, as if someone had placed a Light Spell behind both of them. His lips were a pursed line, and he changed his wand to his left hand. Harry's grip strengthened on his trusty weapon, waiting for the Celestial to make his move. The annoying tingle in his left arm had intensified somewhat as the wizard concentrated on the prefect. And when he did, Harry was taken aback.

Instead of a spell, a giant wave of water was exploding from Kaltag's right palm. Swiftly clearing his mind, closing his eyes, and pointing his wand at the red-haired prefect, Harry inwardly prayed for this enchantment to work.

"Inflectolocus!" The familiar rush of air and weakness and low roar of sound met the sixth year's senses, and he broke open his eyelids. He was now behind the wave of water, now headed for Kaltag. The group of students made noises of amazement at both spectacles, reminding Harry where he was. Quite suddenly, the wave vanished at Kaltag's menial wave, and Harry took this time for his final strike. "Stupefy! Obtero!"

Kaltag barely missed the Stunning Spell, which grazed his arm (leaving a sizzling burn), but the second Contusion Hex knocked the Celestial to his knees, forcing his grip on his wand to loosen.

"Expelliarmus!" The boy's wand zipped through the air and sailed into Harry's outstretched hand. Kaltag mustered enough energy to glower at his dorm mate, clutching his now battered abdomen. The Boy-Who-Lived attempted to apologize with his dour emerald eyes, but the Being looked away in bitterness. Kenward hesitantly stepped forward, taking the offered wand from Harry. He removed his own wand and took down the protection wards over the class. Harry's cheerless gaze landed on Ron and Hermione, who gave him fragile, unwilling smiles. Endymion looked appalled at Harry, and her concerned gaze fell on Kaltag; Nikola, Ella and Starbuck's observations were with their brother and close friend. The Averins were joyful after witnessing the battle between the Paradors.

"Well," Kenward started, his eyes broad. "Mr. Potter is the victor, therefore, Parador gains twenty points. Both men were extremely skilled in the duel. No doubt either of you would have won over each other." He patted the seeker on the back and motioned for him to take his seat, striding over to Kaltag. The Being stood on his own and shook his head at Kenward, taking his seat beside Hermione with a stony face. Neville and Yorick congratulated Harry nervously, remaining strangely calm when he sat between them. Murmuring the countercurse for the Numbing Spell on his arm, Harry tucked his wand away dejectedly. Kenward proceeded to ask the class their opinions, yet Hermione was oddly silent; the air looked oddly bare without her desperate hand.

But Harry's eyes were trained on the injured Celestial in the front desk, and he decided it was time to end this asinine competition.

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Harry dismissed the DA Intermediates at six o'clock for dinner, reminding them to practice when they could. Colin and Dennis Creevey immediately busied themselves with firing a hundred questions at him, all the while helping him straighten the room. He took no notice of the brothers, as his mind lingered to this afternoon. The teenager could not fathom what led him to exact his frustrations on his good friend. The callous words, the conflicts, the duel...it was no wonder Kaltag avoided him. As he had entered the common room to seek the Being out to express regret, Kaltag spotted the Gryffindor and glared, slamming his oLink shut and racing up to the dormitory. He didn't blame him. He'd have done the exact same thing in his position.

Pausing on a particularly gaudy cushion, Harry stared past it in thought. He felt a hand rest on his shoulder as Hermione spoke. "You all right?" She questioned soothingly, in a calm, calculated intonation. Since they hadn't formally apologized, the seeker saw the reason for her measured inquiry. Harry nodded absently, resuming his straightening as Ron stowed Colin's camera away and pushed the excitable brothers out of the Room of Requirement. Puffing out a sigh, the ginger-haired prefect leaned on the door, rubbing his stomach longingly.

"Famished, I am." He groaned answering the rumble of his appetite. Hermione expectedly raised her eyebrows at the Gryffindor keeper, folding her arms across her chest and shaking her bushy brown-haired head.

"Go on." Harry waved toward the door. "I'll meet you in the Great Hall." The cleverest of the three stared skeptically at the black-haired teenager, biting her lip.

"Are you sure, Harry?" she queried, her chocolate orbs shimmering with concern. The young wizard nodded, motioning for them to leave. Ron gently clasped Hermione's wrist in his hand, pulling her out of the room.

"We'll see you then, Harry." The redhead departed, closing the door silently behind the two. The raven-haired teenager sighed, moving to fix the books on the shelf. On the way, he tugged Sir Unfort the mangled test mannequin back into his normal corner, pulling off his threadbare arm in the process. Kneeling before the untidy ledge, Harry rearranged books slowly, pondering his day thus far. His anger was intolerable; it stemmed from the Ball, to Bane, so close to bludgeoning Firenze. He held no regard for himself whatsoever in protecting his professor and perhaps even his peers. It wasn't his fault the centaurs stormed the institution ready to avenge Ronan's murder.

But Bane had said it was one of the students.

Yet his anger was still unwarranted. Harry could now see the eldest Smythe sibling was only trying to assist him. As only a friend would. Feeling pitiful about treating the prefect in such a way, Harry organized the hardbacks and brushed off his robes, heading for the door. As he ran a hand through his disordered locks and unlocked the door, the sixth year exited, closing the door after him. He had only reached the next corridor when he halted in step, narrowing his eyes at the menacing figures before him.

"What do you want?" he demanded, glaring at the waylaying two. He recognized Faryn Dufresne from Aves and the sixth year Falcon House prefect, Marieke Demas. The baleful, straw-colored hair, blue-green eyed female smirked riskily, broadening her chest. Her counterpart, the dark-haired and dark-eyed Marieke, raised an eyebrow in challenge. The young male among the predatory females raised his eyebrows and smirked, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Oh, I see." He chuckled, shaking his head amusingly. "I'm sorry, ladies. But if you want to join the Intermediate Defense Association, it's a bit late in the year for that. Testing is over."

Faryn let out a girlish titter, flipping her faultless flaxen hair over her shoulder. Marieke, like a proportionately figured bodyguard, grinned cheekily at the Gryffindor. "No, no, Po..." Faryn's face contorted for a second as if she had sampled something sordid. Her face cracked into a false, toothy grin, baring her flawless fangs. "...Harry. We've come to express our..." she paused, mulling over her next words and eyeing her partner. "What would you call it, Mari?"

"Sorrow, Faryn."

"Right." She turned her cloudy eyes back to the tense Gryffindor. "Our deepest sorrows."

"I didn't know anyone had died." Harry countered, crossing his arms loosely. His hand wasn't far from his wand, though. Faryn cackled in a high tone, playfully shoving Harry. The seeker was startled by the contact but held his ground against the Entities.

"My, you've a sense of humor, Harry. Unlike Androcles and Draco." She revealed with a slight frown, tilting her head to the side. "But you're extremely amusing...like Kaltagonus."

"Smythe." Marieke added without skipping a beat. Harry narrowed his eyes at the young women.

"Kaltag? I guess you haven't noticed he enjoys insulting you rudely." The sixth year stated nonchalantly. "I'd say he doesn't like you at all."

"Only because you don't like us." Faryn put in, circling the boy. "Draco's told me you like to lead, eh, Harry? Guiding a group of future warriors?"

"Or are the followers now overthrowing you?" Marieke spoke questioningly, favoring her left leg.

"Ooh, your precious Defense Associations," the blonde took over arching a brow. "Hasn't Kaltag shown everyone up?" Harry slit his eyes, turning his head to follow the circling vulture.

"No," he argued, tightening his arms across his chest. "Kaltag is my—"

"Friend?" the girls answered in simultaneous melodic tones.

"Right, the day Kaltagonus shares the spotlight is the day Chimaera and Bellerophon marry." Faryn offered mordantly.

"And that will never happen." The dark-haired prefect chimed in shaking her head negatively. Harry felt his stomach perform a

pathetic sort of joggle. He found himself wondering the truth. But they were from Aves; they had to be lying.

"No...you're...you're wrong." His voice gradually firmed. "Both of you." He couldn't let them degrade his friend; Kaltag wasn't at all the way these Aves Entities were portraying him...was he?

"Oh?" Their sickly sweet, tuneful tones sang. Marieke joined in the intimidating circumnavigation and the two began unhurriedly circling him like sharks.

"He's hanging with your best friends, isn't he?" the leader inquired.

"He is."

"No, he's not—he..." Harry contended, his emerald eyes lighting with anger. The girls shot each other knowing looks, continuing to orbit the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Study groups in the library, taking your place when the friends go off somewhere." Marieke took up, grinning madly. Harry felt slightly uncomfortable in the presence of these teenaged females; his head reeled from uneasiness.

"Besting you in class..."

"...Earning respect you will never receive..." Faryn hissed in his ear. Harry exhaled deeply, his eyes widening as he felt a frosty breeze take over his body. It was as if a Dementor had taken refuge in his abdomen, spreading over his body, poisoning his mind with its iciness. He viewed his life as an aloof observer, watching every dangerous encounter, friendly joke, and study session flick by. But he could still hear Faryn's deceptively soothing voice.

"Taking your place."

"You can see it, no?" Harry watched as he, Hermione and Ron ambled the cobblestone streets of Diagon Alley together, laughing wholeheartedly about nonsense.

"He wouldn't..." he muttered to gain control of his mind, switching to the image of the three battling the troll in their first year. Hermione



was recoiling under a sink while a red-haired Harry swung from the troll's club.

"Yes, you see it..."

"N-No...!" The icy wave washed over him and he pictured Kaltag on a snowy hill in Hogsmeade with the invisibility cloak safely tucked under his arm. Ron and Hermione were at his side viewing the Shrieking Shack from a distance. "Kaltag would never..."

"Your worst fear," Faryn plowed on, pausing directly behind him, "is in the form of Kaltag."

"Kaltag..." Harry heard himself whisper.

"—Is becoming you." Marieke divulged. "Taking away everything you are—"

"—Great Boy-Who-Lived." The Gryffindor shuddered, the icicles of dislike stabbing at his lungs. In a flash, the cold was replaced by fiery heat, burning through his veins. Suddenly, all of his memories didn't consist of the spectacled, untidy-haired, green-eyed boy. But it was Kaltag. Harry growled. Kaltag was taking over. No...Kaltag was his friend. He fought to replay this phrase.

Recent scenes played over in his head. Kaltag with Hermione in class. Kaltag walking around with Ron. Kaltag giving the Quidditch team tips on speed. Kaltag talking back to Snape and barely getting in trouble. Kaltag debasing Malfoy and Xenik. Kaltag defying Bane the centaur.... Kaltag telling him to bridle his rage. The prominent scar on his forehead pricked disturbingly.

"It's true." Faryn's delicate, manicured fingertips traced an elusive path down Harry's jaw line to the base of his skull like velvet tentacles. "And you know it. He's got your friends on his side." Harry's blood boiled; he was getting hot around his collar.

"You're out of the picture."

"Tell me, Harry," Faryn lilted in his other ear. "Are you being upstaged...by a stranger?" The Gryffindor's eyes flared. His body shook with rage as the memories hurried behind his orbs. The girls'

next words were murmured exceedingly low, but he heard them as if they were magically broadcast.

"Think you aren't?" Marieke mumbled. Her thudding footfalls in front of him ceased. "Well, guess what?"

"You are."

And just as the visions stopped, the girls were gone. The heat dissipated, and Harry was left as if he hadn't been touched.

But the fury continued to surge through his body. Kaltag was trying to replace him. Snarling at the nerve of the Celestial to execute such actions, Harry stormed through the castle toward the Great Hall, his apology to Kaltag withering in the walls of the sixth floor corridor.

His mind was only set on confronting Kaltag and seizing what was rightfully his. The stranger had no right to consume his life. The thundering noise of students could be heard numerous corridors away as Harry made his way toward the sound. He passed several Hufflebores and Ravenaires as he trekked on, pushing past them rudely. The young wizard almost shook out of his stupor when he heard his name called.

"Harry!" Ginny Weasley's voice called. The witch rushed to his side with her satchel in hand, studying his angered expression. "Something wrong?"

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" he barked, his shoulder colliding with a seventh year's; he continued to move unfazed. Ginny creased her brows at the determined sixth year knocking through the crowd.

"I don't know, the Great Hall?" she suggested, gripping her bag closely. "Why, something the matter?" Harry grunted as a third year Ravenclaw protested to being shoved against a statue of Wilhelmina the Woeful. The crowd was entering the dining area.

"I need to find them...save them from..." Harry trailed off and stopped his rout. His eyes only narrowed into dangerous emerald slits as he spotted them: Hermione, Ron, and Kaltag were chortling merrily to themselves as they paused in the corridor before the Great Hall. Hermione's eyes found Harry and she motioned to the boys where he was standing with Ginny. Kaltag was the only one

who seemed ill at ease to be around the wizard. Harry's breathing deepened.

He was nearly complete in his goal to consume Harry's identity. With his teeth bared, Harry clenched his fists securely at his sides. His best friends and the Being simply observed him, letting others pass.

"Oy, Harry," Ron started. "We're off to the library after this for you-know-what. You in?" The raven-haired teenager's fringe brushed his brows and tickled his prickling scar. The female prefect gauged the seeker's countenance before she took a hesitant step forward.

"Harry?"

"So, this is it, then?" he declared. "You've already replaced me?" The trio's eyebrows furrowed and they glanced at each other in confusion.

"What are you on about?" Ron queried. "We haven't replaced anyone. And certainly not you."

"Are you sure you're feeling all right, Harry?" motherly Hermione inquired, concern etched in her façade.

"Can't you see?" he bellowed, garnering much unwanted attention; Malfoy and company halted to entertain themselves. "Because of him, we've strayed from each other. WE haven't had much time to ourselves without him joining in. Gaining all the attention."

Kaltag lowered his brows, scoffing. "The only one getting the attention right now is you." He retorted. "What's really the problem?"

Harry's fists were white with rage and his cheeks were burning with fury.

"YOU ARE!" he shouted causing several students to stop and Ginny to jolt in surprise. "You're ruining EVERYTHING!"

"WHAT am I ruining?" Kaltag rejoined, equally angry. "You've done nothing but attack me since—since—"

"YOU CONNIVING CELESTIAL, YOU'VE STOLEN MY FRIENDS! MY LIFE!" Harry roared, spit flying unceremoniously from his mouth.

Parvati and Lavender were immediately on the front lines, soaking every insult and comment for their later gossip.

"Oh, look at that. Sibling rivalry." Malfoy sneered. Ron glared at the Slytherin prefect, disgustingly guffawing with his Averin friends.

"That's rich, Harry." The redheaded Gryffindor keeper chastised. "Now you've gone and made Malfoy happy."

"A rift in mighty Gryffindor's family." The Slytherin leered noisily to the assembling crowds.

"Sod off, Malfoy."

"Ron!" Hermione chided with a scolding look. Kaltag's azure orbs were deadlocked on Harry's green eyes. A crackling drone surrounded the air of both males exuding a power no one knew what to call.

"Ooh."

"Are you going to let him speak to you in that way, Kaltag?" Faryn egged on. Harry blinked to look behind the trio, eyeing the Entities he supposedly daydreamed about gibling with their housemates.

"A mere wizard?" Marieke added.

"Shut it, you cows!" the Paraffin spat whipping around to glare daggers at them instead.

"Don't speak to Faryn that way." Xenik warned, guarding the wicked Entity. Kaltag took a threatening step toward the vindictive clique.

"I'll speak to her however I please."

"Why? Because you're granddad's number one?" Xenik condemned, boring into the targeted Celestial.

"You really are bitter, you know that? Do yourself a favor," the Celestial snapped, twisting to face the seething Harry. "Grow up." The student broke through the crowd of heckling Averins and raced out of sight. The quiet assembly of pupils gradually broke apart, whispering excitedly about the argument and heading for the Great

Hall. Ginny viewed her first captain warily before joining the crowd with a nearby Neville. Ron and Hermione approached the seeker with caution, hesitantly meeting his eyes. Glancing around hastily, Hermione grasped Harry's elbow and dragged him and Ron a few corridors away from the boisterous horde and into a close alcove. After a few moments of observable silence where the seeker calmed quite a bit, Hermione rounded on him.

"What was that all about?" she hissed, her stern, McGonagall stance in full effect with her forcefully balled fists on her hip.

"You heard me." The young wizard snapped.

"Yes, I did. And that was preposterous." She criticized strictly.

"I did what I had to." Harry defended, turning away from them. "I kept Kaltag from robbing my identity."

"Now where would you get an idea like that?" Hermione scoffed, cocking her hips to the side. Harry grazed his tongue over his teeth and lowered his eyes. If he told them he was hallucinating about the Aves girls, they'd say he was cracked.

"What matters is that we're still best friends." He altered the topic.

"Yeah, but not friends with Kaltag anymore." Ron pointed out angrily. "What'd you go and do that for?" Harry became annoyed with Ron's ignorance. He had repeated himself and made himself clear about his position before countless eavesdroppers.

"He's trying to take over everything. He wants my life." His reasoning sounded nothing short of pitiful on his ears, but Harry stood his ground. Hermione released a dry laugh at the excuse.

"Of all the—why would he want to?" she questioned. "He's got great friends, siblings, p—" The clever Gryffindor concluded her list with wide brown eyes. Ron's ears reddened under his red mop and he gave Hermione an unimpressed look. Harry nodded emitting a short, derisive snort.

"What, Hermione?" he asked, eyeing the witch's apologetic gaze with a glower. "Say it, then. He's got parents." The Muggleborn's eyes were downcast before she held his gaze frighteningly.

"Well..." she began meekly, waiting for an outburst. "...Yes." The remaining Potter simply released a wry chuckle. It always did come back to his dead parents, didn't it?

"Of course. Why would he want my life, with the only living relatives that hate me, or the Dark Lord that wants my head; lest we forget the burden of being me altogether."

"Harry, you know that's not what I meant..." The black-haired boy turned on her.

"What did you mean, Hermione?"

"What's gotten into you?" Ron interjected, his forehead creased and the Weasley anger at bay. "I thought we were past this." Harry blinked at his best friend, wrinkling his eyebrows.

"Past what?"

"Fifth year." The lanky ginger-haired wizard reminded. "You being a pain in the neck, a case. Snapping at everyone." Hermione wordlessly backed her partner up, expecting an explanation. Harry weighed his answers carefully, choosing the best one that kept his friends on his side.

"Thought you'd be used to it by now. You survived it last year, didn't you?" he replied coolly, heading in the direction opposite the Great Hall. With furtive glimpses between one another, Hermione and Ron felt they had no choice but to follow Harry.

He was, after all, their best friend.

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The subsequent weeks were generally on edge for the sixth year Paradors. Rather than choose a side, everyone remained somewhat neutral, keeping their opinions to themselves. Harry happily settled back into his old routine of associating with his friends, while Kaltag was seen either by himself, with Ella, or with his siblings. The two boys weren't seen at meals at the same time together, nor were they sitting with each other during classes. The most contact they had been less than two minutes one afternoon when the sixth year

Celestials returned to the tower, perspiring, slightly bruised, and panting heavily.

Kaltag waltzed in with a large bloody gash on his cheek, walking past the three poring over Charms homework.

"What happened?" Hermione concernedly inquired, absentmindedly brushing her own cheek where Kaltag's wound would have been.

"Faryn. Dagger handling with Chiron." He clarified, wiping a fleck of blood from his cheek. In a quick movement he whipped out two ornately bejeweled silver daggers from his side pockets and held them in attack position.

"Wicked." Ron exclaimed in awe.

"That's barbaric." Hermione contradicted with a frown. When Harry kept taciturn, the student's chilling eyes landed on him.

"It's necessary." He responded in a clipped tone.

Though Harry refused to admit it, he understood at the back of his mind he was at fault. He knew it was juvenile to presume Kaltag would do such a thing, but part of him was still upset. He had several chances to apologize, but all he seemed to do was make things worse. Especially at last week's Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff match.

The Paradors were filling the stands with their scarves wrapped tightly around their necks. The biting winds of November had cursed them all, taking scarves and mittens hostage in her sweeping clutches. The sky was dull gray with a light drizzle, but still fair conditions for today's match.

Harry and Ron shuffled into the stands conversing over what tactics they believed the teams would be implementing. Hermione had already retreated to sit with the sixth year girls and Ginny. Rubbing his cold hands together, Harry blew out a breath into the cool air, dying for a warm butterbeer about now. The two had just begun a healthy verbal spat over who would use the most ploys when Harry looked over Ron's shoulder. On the empty space of bench beside them, Kaltag had just entered their row to sit, but ceased upon

spotting Harry. The two stared less than civilly at each other, before Kaltag turned away.

"Sorry for bothering you." He murmured, ready to exit the bench. The teenager considered this the perfect time to express his regret for their exchanged words. What better luck than to reunite with a good friend than over a Quidditch match? But Harry wished he could have had a better grasp on his tongue: Lady Luck wasn't keen on carrying out his requests yet.

"Right. Wouldn't want the Heir of Olympus sitting with lowly wizards and all. Bad publicity." Kaltag halted mid step, and from the small clouds of visible air around him, Harry could tell he was breathing hard. Ron stiffened beside him, watching his dorm mate in sympathy. The Celestial did not react, but left the bleacher and the stands; Harry deduced he left the pitch altogether. Feeling yet another stab of resentment, Harry leveled his gaze with the ground. Why was he still being nasty to Kaltag, the son of his godmother? Why couldn't he let it go? And most of all, what did Faryn and Marieke do to him in that corridor?

Moments following Kaltag's departure, Arthur Gilliam, Icarus, Yorick, and Starbuck filled the vacant seats. Yorick revolved in his spot, searching the heads of the Paradors.

"Oy, where's Smythe?" he inquired, glancing at the baffled Starbuck. A knot of remorse tied itself in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"He, uh..." the teenager launched. "He, uh, wasn't...wasn't feeling well." Ron bitterly shook his shaggy mane and muttered under his breath looking over the field.

"I'll say."

He knew his friends forewent publicly interacting with the Being of the Elements, instead mingling with him. Harry was conscious of the fact the sixth year Gryffindor prefects only consorted with him because they were worried. It bugged him to think his friends weren't very confident in his emotions to garner worry, but it was worth it. Yet he continued to feel remorse for what he had said. Why wouldn't his pride stand aside so he could properly apologize? Kaltag must really hate him now.



Ginny sat comfortably in a cozy armchair before the fire, taking a break from her tremendous amount of homework by reading the morning's Daily Prophet. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were scouring their acquired library texts for any notation of the Ravenstone Scepter or the Sword of Amenophus. Harry estimated they searched through at least forty books this afternoon before withdrawing to the warm common room.

As the weeks progressed, the search for the coveted weapons seemed to delve further and further into nowhere. The three spent countless afternoons and breaks searching for any sign of the weapon, following one dead end lead after another. Nikola and Starbuck assisted when they could, but mostly helped search with their detached brother. The sword and scepter seemed more myth and memory than tangible, clandestine artillery.

"We've looked through a thousand books." Ron embellished. "There's got to be some mention somewhere about them if they're so important."

"It took us a while to find Nicholas Flamel and the Sorcerer's Stone, too, remember?" Hermione reminisced. "Maybe they're in an obscure place."

Ron snorted, pushing the thick book aside. "Well, we had better find it by the end of this week. We've got a match in December I've got to focus on."

"That's a week before the break." Ginny cut in.

"No harm in being prepared." Ron countered while flipping through a grimy text, but broke away to look interestedly at his sister. "The way Hufflepuff creamed Ravenclaw was no fluke. If Hufflepuff is that good, I've no doubt they're going to step up against us just as hard. Too bad for the Brittlebores, though. Voltaire crushed them."

"I wouldn't worry about having any Sliatyckx games, or Quidditch for that matter." Hermione stated knowledgeably, motioning to the moving picture on the front page of the Prophet. "With the way Fudge acted at that address, I'd say he's still standing by his decision over a decade ago. He hates the Celestials." The four drooped despondently, working with difficulty.

"D'you really think he'd separate the worlds again?" The ginger-haired fifth year questioned, sounding every bit as hopeful as she gazed at Hermione. The intellectual witch wrinkled her forehead, shaking her head negatively.

"I don't know." She leaned closer to Ginny to keep her voice down. "From what Lupin told us earlier this summer, I'd say he so desperately wants to." Harry's gaze broke from the females as he took in the raving black and white photograph of minister Fudge, decrying the Celestial race. From what the Prophet had written, a simple inquiry session had gone sour when a reporter brought up his lawmaking at the beginning of the 1980's. Apparently, Fudge wasn't pleased, and when badgered by more reporters, he blew up, standing by his decision and somehow dragging Harry and Dumbledore's name through the mud. It was a good thing none of the tabloids had gotten hold of what happened at the Halloween Ball. But it was inevitable.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Fudge becomes the target for many people, now." Ron affirmed ruffling his locks. Ella Burton descended the dormitory stairwell and plopped into the other armchair with her belongings. "The people aren't going to take this lightly. Mark my words, he'll be out of office one way or another by the New Year." Harry rolled his eyes and glanced at the clock, cursing under his breath. He had detention with Snape in fifteen minutes.

"I'm off, then." He notified his friends. Ron offered him a sympathetic look lifting his eyebrows.

"I'm glad I'm not you, mate." He expressed, tracing a finger over a particularly long clause in Enchanted Arsenal: Bewitched Armaments of Old. "With any luck, Jace might be the presiding teacher there." Ginny snorted, folding the Prophet in half.

"Don't hold your breath, Harry."

The Gryffindor rolled his stray essays up and set them in his school bag, yanking it over his shoulder. With one final greeting nod at Ella, Harry trudged out of the common room, dreading his upcoming meeting.

Shuffling down the dim passageways of Hogwarts School, Harry mulled over what this encounter would entail. He clearly recalled the

last time he was in the presence of Severus Snape unaccompanied was when he was still learning Occlumency at Dumbledore's behest. Snape had made it impeccably clear that he had never wanted Harry alone in his company ever again. Harry had been true to his word of never reiterating what he viewed in the Pensieve; and he was truly sorry his untamed curiosity incriminated him once more by violating the professor's privacy. The young wizard was sure Snape had remembered his command after all these months.

The hallways grew cooler as he made his way to the Potions dungeon, his body feeling like lead with every step. He sincerely hoped Snape would order him to scrub cauldrons or tables and leave him be for the rest of the night. The familiar thick entrance to the potions laboratory met Harry's sight and he swallowed anxiously, making his entire mouth dry in the process. His hand was already at the doorknob when he mentally kicked himself. Withdrawing his hand, Harry curled it into a fist and rapped gently on the coarse wood.

"Enter." Snape's deep, barely audible voice allowed. Inhaling shallowly, the teenager pulled open the door and walked in, shutting it noiselessly behind him. Snape sat at his desk, surrounded by stacks of parchment with an elegant, red-tipped quill in his long, abrasive fingers. His greasy hair shook slightly as his head shifted, and he put his quill to work on the parchment teeming with red marks. Harry remained silent, tugging on his bag for reassurance as he stood patiently for acknowledgement. "You're early, Potter."

"Only by one minute, sir." His voice sounded strangely hoarse in his ears. Snape's dark eyes bore into him with reservation, before they returned to the essay judgment. The man scribbled one last note on the paper before he pointed the quill to a far corner without looking up. Harry followed the quill and observed high stacks of grimy cauldrons he hadn't noticed before.

"I want those cauldrons scrubbed spotless before you leave this classroom," he instructed, choosing another essay. "As always, without magic, Potter. Get to work." Harry nodded, setting his knapsack on a nearby stool and rolling his robe sleeves up to his elbows. From one glance it looked to be close to thirty cauldrons, all with varying degrees of filth. Snape had provided two slightly stained ivory rags, one steel-bristled brush, and a three-quarter full bottle of magical solvent. He bent to pick up and unscrew the cleaner, quickly

covering it back as his eyes stung and his nose protested to the potency. This substance was more powerful than his Aunt Petunia's Muggle cleaners he usually managed. Harry swore he heard Snape's face creak as his countenance pulled into an unmistakable smirk. "Something the matter, Mr. Potter? Aren't used to performing such menial tasks as the rest of us?"

The Gryffindor overcame the urge to sneer and narrow his eyes, instead pulling the first cauldron toward him. "No, sir. I think I can handle just fine."

Hours later, Harry was inwardly thanking his contemptible Aunt for always making him scrub objects to perfection. The mess of cauldrons was burnished well; they could have all been made into obscure mirrors. Harry knew not even Snape could argue he had done an impressive job.

Speaking of the dreadful instructor, Snape had surprisingly remained silent all night. The telltale scratches of quill on parchment and the rasping of the frayed brush on the pewter cauldron were the only sounds breaking the stillness of the cold dungeon. Harry was relieved: Snape hadn't done anything to make him lash out, and he hadn't spoken to make Snape taunt him. If he could finish these last two cauldrons without hell breaking loose, he could call this night the most civil evening he'd had with the man.

Sweat poured from Harry's forehead and body as he intensely scoured the cauldron. Grime was embedded under his fingernails and grease coated his once olive skin. He paused in his scrubbing to wipe his face on his soaked sleeve, continuing after stifling a yawn.

"What, too disgraceful a task for you, Potter?" Snape drawled, smirking at the Gryffindor sitting on the stone floor. "Not used to being made to do something other than autographing a portrait?" Harry burned at the comment, closing his eyes momentarily. He'd let that comment slip; Snape was only trying to get him to blow up. He would not let the man have the benefit of the doubt: he didn't answer. The sixth year heard the clicking of Snape's boots on the gray stone ground. "Not as if you've ever done any work in your life, besides relay lies and tales of death defiance to your adoring fans."

Harry's breathing hitched in his throat, but he breathed out soothingly, quieting the nagging voice in the back of his head, urging him to defend his honor. After a few more minutes of vigorously brushing the cauldron, Harry seized a rag in his fist, harshly wiping the grime away. Setting the pot in the shipshape pile, Harry dragged the final task out, rubbing the grunge away with purpose; he found it helped somewhat to imagine he was scraping away the potion master's face.

"Of course you think I'm beneath you," Snape burred easily. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw the teacher wrap his cloak under his folded arms, looking like a vampire stalking its prey. "You're just like that mongrel." The seeker clenched the rag in his filthy fist, swabbing away the dirt. He knew Snape would have brought Sirius up sometime or later; he just didn't know why he was so angry the man had insulted him. He'd heard the professor call the convict worse. The only sound penetrating the dungeon calm was of Harry's brush grating the inside of the cauldron.

Snape tilted his oily head to the side, pulling his pale lips into a sneer. "Noble, noble Potter." He continued, his footsteps echoing throughout the dungeon, getting louder with each footfall. "Holding your tongue, it seems. But, oh, I know you, Potter." Pearls of sweat dribbled down Harry's forehead, each drop making a metallic 'clink' as it landed on the spotless area of the cauldron. Snape's voice held more spite and insult from his near proximity. "You'll break before long, boy. Your Gryffindor pride can only hold for so long."

The words were spoken with such abhorrence Harry was amazed. The darker man sighed wearily as Harry increased his scrubbing, expelling hot air through his nose in the process. If he fought back against Snape, there was no telling what would happen. But Harry was sure he'd end up in the headmaster's office either way.

"Face it, Potter." Snape spat out, allowing the slight leak of saliva from his over-pronunciation to course its way down his lips. "You're every bit like your supercilious father. Wanting things handed to you on a crystal platter rather than working for it. Full of arrogance, always swaggering about with the mutt and that undomesticated wolf." The brush in Harry's hand began to quake wrathfully in his forceful grip; suddenly, the grime on the cauldron wasn't wiping away as easily. He heard Snape scoff in triumph as he paused two tables away from the working student. "I expect he was just as

arrogant and bigheaded as the Dark Lord pointed his wand at him one last time—"

Harry scrambled up from his position, flinging the cauldron and brush to the other side of the room. "SHUT UP!" he bellowed, pulling out his wand. The abandoned cauldron reverberated on the stone floor, staining it with its grime. The faithful weapon was much slipperier in his grip, due to the grease and soot coating his digits. The man never knew when to quit; it seemed confrontation was the only way the man could eke out a living.

Snape's wand was already in hand and he leered at the Gryffindor as if expecting this outburst. The student mused they were either about to duel, or perform defensive Legilimency or Occlumency on each other. Snape already looked to have the Legilimency spell on his lips. Harry's uneven pants came out roughly, with a derisive laugh somewhere in between. The dark-eyed instructor tightened his grip on his wand, staring at the wild-eyed Gryffindor.

"Give me a reason, Potter." He hissed. Harry snorted breathily between gasps of breath, aiming his weapon at his most hated professor.

"I'm not afraid, professor." He confessed, shrugging carelessly. "I'm used to threats. Hell, Voldemort is after my hide every day."

"Do not speak his name!" the potions master bit out caustically. His eyes were untamed and fatal, glowering at the Boy-Who-Lived in deep hatred. But Harry couldn't find it in himself to care any longer. Snape had mocked his father and his most trusted friends for too long.

"It's only a name, sir," he lectured angrily, taking a step toward his right. Snape followed, and the two began a slow, circling dance of intimidation around the worktables separating them. "After all, 'fear of a name, only increases fear of the thing itself.'" The wizard's orbs glimmered as if he had caught wind of the proverb before, but they turned hard again as he realized where he was.

"Give me one—good—reason, Potter." He ground out through clenched, yellowed teeth, stepping carefully around the daunting ring. Harry's grasp around his wand slackened somewhat, but the two were still locked in a dead heat. "I've been waiting for this

moment since your father first turned his wand on me." The seeker slowly came to a halt, staring wide-eyed at his professor. Memories of Snape hanging upside down plagued his mind...as well as Snape regretfully talking to the older man about his past mistakes. Snape wanted retribution; his hate had gotten him this far. Spiraling him into the clutches of Voldemort, hating everyone around him...becoming bitter.

And Harry didn't want to end up this way.

The young wizard heaved a great breath, looking Snape sadly in his implacable eyes. His grasp finally loosened completely, and Harry brought his wand down. Snape brandished his wand defensively, his mouth by now ready to speak a curse. His gaze broadened somewhat as he watched the headstrong Gryffindor tuck his wand into his trousers in bewilderment. Harry wiped his hands on the back of his cloak, eyeing his elder with mixed emotion. His face was a calm, emotionless mask and his eyes were blank as he tossed a rag aside.

"It's not worth it, sir." He muttered to the man training his wand carefully on him. "It just isn't worth it." It took Snape a while to register the impact of his pupil's words, but the man gradually lowered his wand, hiding it in the folds of his robes with misgiving. After his puzzled appraisal of the impassive Gryffindor, he curtly nodded his head at the thick door.

"Dismissed." Harry held in his relieved sigh and quickly jostled through the tables, grabbed his satchel and headed to the door. When his hand had reached the knob, he paused, remembering the outcome of his last time alone in Snape's presence. He would probably not do this if the chance ever presented itself again. Licking his lips in anxiety, the Gryffindor faced his professor, who had looked up from gazing at the boy's retreating back.

"I'm sorry, sir." He uttered with a bothersome lump in his throat. "I'm sorry I violated your privacy that—that night. It was..." Harry squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to continue. "...Wrong...of me to do so. I should have never done it." The young wizard yanked the door open and exited without a single glance back at his teacher's countenance.

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Harry rubbed his back soothingly, shooting a peeved look at Prefect Ron Weasley. The redhead peered around the empty room before slamming the door shut and sealing it with a locking charm. The green-eyed boy massaged his arm where his best friend's handprint no doubt now resided under his robes.

"You could have asked me to come up here politely, rather than drag me up here like a prisoner." He seethed, glaring at the pink-faced keeper. Ron merely stormed into the lavatory, glanced around and shut the door with a resounding slam. Harry glowered once more at the efficient wizard who was ignoring him and searching under the beds. When he stood, he spotted a silvery-white owl preening on a bedpost, and disregarding the two. Waving his hands frantically at the bird, Ron succeeding in chasing the owl out, which hooted and ruffled her feathers before soaring out the open window. Finally, his gaze rested on his irked co-captain, and Ron crossed his arms determinedly.

"What is this?" he questioned, eyebrows lowered gravely. Harry's eyes swayed from side to side, sweeping the dormitory (the obvious answer) before he locked eyes with Ron once more. He had hoped this wasn't about his detention with Snape a few nights ago. He had failed to mention the altercation between him and the angry professor. The Gryffindor instead relayed to his inquisitive friends he had spent the night insipidly scrubbing cauldrons. Being Ron and Hermione's friends for six years, he knew they probably caught on to the fact he was withholding information.

"What's what?" he queried. The young Weasley male sighed crossly, unfolding his arms and gesturing to the room.

"You, this, being a prat to Kaltag?" Harry suddenly knew what the kidnapping was about. They had been in the common room scanning books for any information on the weapons. Kaltag had entered swiftly, only to be confronted yet again with Harry's hostile glare. After an odd look from Ron, he found himself being dragged up to the sixth year boys' dormitory for an interrogation.

He huffed furiously, glaring daggers at the hijacking keeper. "I don't need this." Harry gruffly brushed off.



"Yes, you do, Harry." Ron replied forcefully. "You—you just changed one night. What's gotten into you?" Harry's furrowed brows untied for a moment as he thought over his predicament. Ron was right; he had just swung from one mood to hostile in that evening. He still hadn't figured out if he were hallucinating about the Entities involved, but the two looked especially smug after he chewed out the Paraffin Being every time. Harry shook his head, creasing his brows in a frown.

"You don't get it, Ron." He argued, turning away, and clenching his fists at his side. "He's not trying to do this to you." Ron threw up his hands in the air.

"Do what?"

"Take over!"

"Take over what?" The sixth year growled, balling his fists and whipping around to confront his best friend.

"Life!" Ron's face scrunched in confusion as he shrugged indifferently.

"Whose life?" Harry wished he could shake some sense into the clueless co-captain.

"MY LIFE!" Harry bellowed, his face burning from his anger. Ron slouched, staring at his best mate in bewilderment. "He's slowly gaining access to every part of my life before he takes over! He's already got you and Hermione! And he'll only get more if I don't stop him now!" The tall keeper angled his head to the side, his mouth hanging open in thought. Harry breathed deeply, taking in the crisp air of their dormitory.

"No, he's not, Harry." Ron responded slowly and quietly. With a sigh, the freckle-faced prefect advanced toward Harry, a spirit of heaviness radiating off of him. "He can never replace you, Harry." The seeker merely scoffed sharply at his best friend. Ron wasn't even aware he was on Kaltag's side. The keeper rested a hand on Harry's shoulder, feeling the boy tense. "He can never make fun of Malfoy as you do, or catch the snitch as brilliantly as you can." Harry had to release a laugh at the inanity of the concept, but relaxed a bit under Ron's smile.

"Trust me: Kaltag couldn't have gotten past that Horntail like you did, or defeat Quirrell in the final hollow." Ron went on fancifully. "He could never have rescued Ginny in the chamber or gone after Sirius in third year. I know he wouldn't have thought about riding an invisible horse to the Ministry last year. And Kaltag would never find excuses to get Hermione out of forcing us to do homework. And he couldn't possibly wear the annual Weasley sweater as proudly as you do. He's not you, Harry." The red-haired chess wizard stated firmly, holding Harry's gaze. The black-haired boy had tensed somewhat at the mention of the ministry escapade, but nodded slowly. "He could never take your place, Harry. Not the six years of friendship, adventure, and brotherhood we share."

Harry's lips quirked into a pleased grin at Ron's confession. "Brothers." He whispered, frowning. "Even though Kaltag was a virtual stranger, he's become like a brother to me. Ron...what have I done?" The keeper slapped him genially on the back with a lopsided grin.

"I've been asking myself the same question actually, for about two weeks." He joked, his face soon tensing into significance. "You need to mend things with Kaltag, Harry. I fear if you refuse, things will be too awkward or too painful if you don't. You'd never forgive yourself." Ron's brown orbs expressed an isolated gleam, and his hand fell flaccidly from his best friend's shoulder. Harry assumed Ron was referring to their fourth year, where they had fought and hadn't spoken to each other. He contrasted his emotions now with Ron's two years ago: he, like the prefect, had accused Kaltag of something wholly untrue. And they hadn't spoken in weeks. The Gryffindor shook his head heavily; Kaltag was too good a friend to give up.

Sighing profoundly, Harry adjusted his glasses over his eyes. "Do you know where he went off to?" The sixth year keeper grinned with enthusiasm and nodded.

"Outside." Harry scoffed humorously and rolled his eyes, walking toward the door.

"A load of help that is." He flung over his shoulder as he walked out of the dormitory. The raven-haired wizard had an odd churning in his abdomen as he descended the stairs and exited through the portrait.

The walk through the castle was uneventful, as the young man walked with purpose in his step. It was mid afternoon, so most students were inside beginning their homework. The weather was unpredictable, as it varied from cold and windy to foggy and storming for weeks. Harry often wondered if a Celestial was indeed controlling the conditions; if so, they sure had plenty of erratic mood swings.

The sky was dismally overcast with light pelts of miniscule droplets, every now and then splashing on Harry's nose. In the distance, the Whomping Willow shuddered in a blanketing wind, while the flags of the Quidditch Pitch towers fluttered in a brief moment of glory. Harry considered Hagrid's hut with its smoking chimney in remorse: he hadn't visited Hagrid in a while, other than attend his class. Perhaps he needed to speak with the half-giant again for advice, though he knew the friendly professor would chew him out like Ron did.

He had been searching the grounds for a while. Roaming over the hills, along the edge of the forest; he even paused by the lake to watch the giant squid wade in the water, before breaking the surface to disappear. Kaltag was nowhere to be found. Feeling a bit peeved at having to search for the Being, Harry bundled his robe close around his neck, glaring into the wind. He wanted to be in the warmth of the common room, falsely smiling at his friends and housemates. But he realized if he let this slide, he wouldn't be able to apologize again. He'd rather have his pride wounded for a few weeks rather than decades.

Harry was on his way to the Quidditch Pitch when he paused a distance away from the massive, cloudy-windowed quarters. Narrowing his eyes at the slight warmth crawling through his limbs in the cold, the Gryffindor's feet began heading in the opposite direction to the Herbology greenhouses; something was drawing him there. The boy minded his steps as he measured what the feeling was: a churning of familiarity and knowledge. Something he felt when he was usually around Sirius or Remus, or when he looked through the photo album of his parents.

A thick branch of enchanted snapdragon poked through the transom, curling over the broken, swinging sign of greenhouse four, and Harry silently tramped up the marked path to the entrance. He tentatively stretched his hand forward and rested it on the eroded door handle, squinting at the opaque windows. Feeling his pockets one last time

for his wand, Harry clicked the handle and opened the door, entering cautiously.

Greenhouse Four was riddled with many magical plants, including the infant mandrakes from his second year. They were moved to accommodate more exotic flora, which Professor Sprout grew from experimentation or Professor Dianthe salvaged from the destroyed conservatories of Aripedes Academy. Startling red and gold blooms greeted his sight peppering the ceiling with their playful stances; he noted a few worn shelves holding Bell-Curved Sentiments in the corner, fit and a bright blue color; the rest of the greenhouse was dowdy. Movement broke Harry's gaze from the melancholy foliage, and he came face to face with the Celestial he strived to avoid.

Kaltag was tending to what seemed to be a shrunken rosebush (which was blooming just as he turned his attention to the Gryffindor), in a copper pot. His green-eyed expression went from one of seclusion to azure-eyed displeasure upon beholding Harry. The Gryffindor found himself once more infuriated at being here, glaring at the prefect across from him. He felt he was right and Ron was horribly mistaken: the Celestial's eyes were already turning green.

"Well, I didn't want to be here either." He blurted out condescendingly, flicking a jade leaf with his index finger. Kaltag delicately placed a finger over a bud on his plant, turning his interest to the bud as it magically bloomed, blushing a vibrant crimson.

"Then why are you here?" he countered, narrowing his eyes as the vivid blossom wilted darkly under his emerald gaze. "Inevitable confrontation?"

"Ron told me you were out here." Harry abruptly ceased his somewhat fascinated gawk at the potted plant. The Being of Elements huffed mockingly, wrenching the poisoned bloom off the unsullied plant.

"I see." He replied with aggravation apparent in his tone. "No witnesses." The seeker grumbled heatedly under his breath, tightening his fists.

"No, I came to talk—calmly—to you about my...about my—how I've been." Harry sputtered, cracking his knuckles. "My behavior."

Kaltag's jade eyes pierced the identical orbs before melting back into its normal icy blue.

"Talk." He shortly demanded, crumpling the dry bud in his grasp. Harry was livid. The warmth in his body renewed, and burned. The plants in the conservatory ruffled restlessly around them as the wind whistled lightly outside. Kaltag was talking to him as if he were superior. The Paraffin's eyes darted to the plants, and he narrowed them considerably.

"I've been acting, ungrateful, unkind," he swallowed the coagulated clump of discharge in his throat, hunting for words that didn't make him sound remotely like a Slytherin. "Uh, horrid..."

"In short, a prat and a git." Kaltag summarized with a small smirk. Those were the kind of words Harry was trying to dodge. Through gritted teeth, Harry nodded.

"I wasn't myself." He admitted, somewhat befuddled.

"That doesn't justify the reason for you to go off yelling at me," Kaltag whipped, thinning his eyes into slits. "Humiliating me—"

"I KNOW!" Harry yelled, shaking his fists furiously at the sloped ceiling in frustration. Kaltag didn't budge, instead taking in the shaking form of Harry Potter. "It's just—you're so perfect and a Celestial, and everyone's always on about you! You know Sirius and you've got the perfect family, and I've never had that. It's like I'm competing with you, though I know there isn't any competition! I guess my behavior just played off my deep—deep—inner feelings of resentment." Harry was out of breath by the time he finished his rant, and sweat was beginning to form in a light film on his shiny forehead. Kaltag stood not ten feet away from him, his eyebrows lowered, and his arms traversed in reflection. His next words were to affect Harry in such away that neither boy would be the same.

"Is that your apology?" he responded, as if he had uncovered something ridiculous.

Harry's eyes expanded in vehemence, and he felt a vein throb in his sweaty temple. He grabbed the nearest pot of an immature Bell-Curved Sentiment, and gripped it threateningly.

"You know what?" he gruffly queried, squeezing the plant and holding it in throwing position. "Why don't you take this plant and lob it—!"

Suddenly, the warmth spreading through his body unexpectedly chilled to a comfortable temperature, and he felt untamed energy seep out of his lean body. The plants rustled again, breaking out of their stagnancy to bloom, grow wildly, and cause commotion from end to end in Greenhouse Four. Kaltag broke his stony glare from the Gryffindor to take in his surroundings guardedly. Harry was overwhelmed the plants came to life out of the blue, and dropped the pot of the riotously blossoming, crimson Bell-Curved Sentiment wrapping around his wrist. Tugging at the worming vines twirling around his wrist, Harry finally ripped the green rope from his arm, and flipped his wand out defensively.

"Harry, calm down!" Kaltag ordered, backing slowly toward the wand-toting wizard. "Settle down!" Harry had the good urge to shout back how the Celestial would calm down if plants were attacking him, but remembered when he, Ron, and Hermione jumped through the trap door in their first year. With the Devil's Snare winding around their throats, all they needed was to be calm to escape harm. Breathing evenly in his agitation, Harry overlooked the burbling and buzzing of the plants surrounding the teenagers, while the mandrake leaves shook ahead of them. The air was surprisingly earthy and serene as he deeply inhaled, watching as Kaltag tried in vain to settle the vegetation. His stark orbs were once again glimmering bottle green, and the few plants he aimed his glowing hand at paused on the spot. In seconds, the tumult died to a dead halt, as Harry rounded his wand on the contained magical plants, and Kaltag panted harshly.

The young wizard eyed their environs, with wide, vigilant eyes, expelling breath carefully. "What was that?" He was suddenly bemused when Kaltag pounced on him, his eyes unbelieving and accusing at the same time.

"You...you're an Elemental." He breathed disbelievingly. "An earth Elemental." Harry scrunched his face in skepticism, warily putting his wand away. The Greek boy motioned to the plants in full bloom around them, making the drab greenhouse seem livelier with color than it had been moments ago. "I knew there was something different about you. Familiar." He squinted his eyes, studying the

dark-haired Gryffindor before him, as if looking for the familiarity. "You did this."

"What?" was the only thoughtful response Harry could come up with at the time.

"These plants, everything," he waved in mysticism. "You made them grow." Harry surveyed the room in doubt, taking in everything from the red Bell-Curved Sentiments on the shelves, to the yellow flowers along the snapdragon's branches. Even the Sentiment he had fought off lay besmirching the floor in dirt, but with vibrant vermilion blooms.

"You're saying I did this," he indicated the entire house. "I made this happen?" The Being looked thoughtfully at the wizard, scratching his chin.

"I've never seen something like this. Actually, I've never heard of any wizard with Celestial powers, especially so late in life. Only Celestials." He determined, bending to lift a drooping Sentiment bud in his fingers. "Did you know you were an Elemental? That you have these fascinating powers?"

"...Powers the Dark Lord knows not...."

"What?" Kaltag asked to the mumbled phrase. Harry shook his head staring around him sightlessly.

"Nothing." He waved off, his head whirling. Were these the foretold powers he was destined to have? Or was this some hoax? "Maybe it's just a backlash." The prefect cocked his head to the side, giving him a strange look before Harry sighed. "After the Intermediate lesson, I think I ran into Faryn and Marieke." Kaltag's face contorted, before he nodded resolutely.

"I should have known it was them. This whole conflict has Influence and Discord(1) written all over it." He explained. "They planted their hatred of me in your head." The Gryffindor snorted, kicking the broken vessel on the ground in fury. How many people were going to take over his mind and force him to do and see things that weren't true? He was angry he had allowed another wicked person into his mind without fighting harder. Seconds later, the plants stirred again, and his wand was out. "Just calm down, Harry." Kaltag instructed,

cagily watching the foliage. Breathing once more and setting his wand away, Harry was happy to note the plants ceased to their listless attitudes.

"How am I going to control this?" he questioned, sighing intensely. "How can I be an Elemental?"

"Maybe you're related to a Celestial." Kaltag suggested, heading for the door. The wizard followed, and the two boys clutched their robes close as the wind bit at their exposed skin. The door of Greenhouse Four slammed shut behind their retreating forms as they headed to the school. "Do you know anything about your family? Grandparents, cousins, anything?"

Harry shook his head, glancing back at the greenhouse. "I wouldn't know. It's not like my parents are around to suddenly spring the news on me that I can control plants." He uttered resentfully. "How am I going to control this one?"

Kaltag grinned, patting Harry on the back. "You're looking at the only Celestial who knows exactly what you're going through. I'm not exactly an Elemental, but you have my exact forces of Earth," he stated. "I guess I can help you manage them." The boys sloped up the grassy knoll, eyeing the castle ahead. Harry's green gaze struck Kaltag in bewilderment.

"You'd help me, after I've been such a fright?" he inquired incredulously. The Being shot him a quirky smile, his wry blue topaz eyes alighting in contentment.

"What are friends for?"

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The six friends sat glumly at the Gryffindor table for dinner in the Great Hall Friday. Solemnly munching on shepherd's pie and chicken, they ate in rigid frustration. It had been weeks into their search, and they still found nothing. It was more frustrating than sitting through Potions with a remarkably incensed potions master. Days and nights were spent in the library until Madam Pince threatened the Paradors with her wand, pushing them out of her treasured library.



The six munched languidly on their meal, mulling over what was so important about the weapons that Voldemort had to forge an alliance with Mystikos. Emotions were running high between the six; Hermione nearly burst into tears the previous night, after leafing through her forty-seventh book of the night. Starbuck snapped at every younger year that approached the prefects for assistance; Ron kept dozing off, and told off Parvati and Lavender for breathing too loud; Nikola kept bending fire poker as an outlet to her dissatisfaction.

Only Kaltag and Harry, who were on convalescent terms, were ostensibly silent and not as tetchy as their friends. Neither boy made a move to alert anyone to Harry's newfound powers, as he himself didn't understand them. Harry still had a difficult time coming to terms with his ability. All he realized was it was supposed to be instrumental in defeating the threat of the wizarding world. And that would not get to happen if he could not manipulate it.

"Why can't we seem to figure out that dream?" Livid Ron bellowed, slamming his fists and silverware hard on the table. He earned many curious and startled glares from his fellow tablemates. Hermione looked at him in disappointment before offering her explanation.

"Perhaps we interpreted it wrongly," she rationalized serenely, taking time to peer at the cloudy enchanted ceiling. "Maybe there's just something we overlooked. And, of course, there've been no Death Eater raids cited in the Daily Prophet of late." She sighed overwhelmingly, lifting her utensils to slice into her cutlet. "I guess we've been about this all wrong. After all, there've been no august mentions in any of the issues since we've been reading them." The clever witch twirled her spoon in her potatoes, looking forlorn and defeated. Harry tapered his eyes at the intelligent prefect. There was something all too familiar about what she said, but he couldn't remember.

Kaltag's free hand went to grope his necklace while Ron leaned tiredly on his arm. "We've searched for days and weeks, racked up hours upon hours for something that's out of our control anyhow." The Gryffindor prefect argued despairingly. "They're safe, aren't they? Dumbledore says they are."

"Mr. Smythe says they are," Hermione corrected, sweeping a bushy tendril behind her ear. "And we know that Voldemort knows that he had them."

Nikola ran a pale hand through her straight blonde hair. "Father never mentioned them. Never even told us. Naturally." Starbuck, who had been quiet the entire time, nodded grumpily sipping his pumpkin juice quickly.

"We'd better head to the library if we're going to find something worthwhile." He stood as the others followed. The walk to the library was an edgy, exhausted one, as the red-eyed Ron and Hermione fussed unenthusiastically about the efficiency of the library. Harry continued to ponder what had caught his attention in Hermione's earlier comment, but his mind couldn't quickly channel the awareness.

"...I'm only saying it's an old library. Maybe the books are outdated." He directed to the glowering Hermione. The prefect gasped angrily and gripped her bag tight.

"If you ever opened Hogwarts, A History you'd know the library updates its stock every four months." She disputed, folding her arms sharply. Ron censored a yawn, catching his slipping bag before it hit the ground.

"Well, maybe that book needs an update." He retorted, following Starbuck into the library. Harry remained silent as he thought over the remark.

"...We've been about this all wrong. After all, there've been no august mentions in any of the issues since we've been reading them..."

August mentions? Why did that sound so maddeningly familiar?

As they passed the stack of old newspapers coming into the area, Harry paused to glance at today's edition of The Olympic Herald. It was merely an article on the beginning of Peace Talks between the worlds. But there was something...

August mentions...Harry's eyes widened as he beamed.

"Hermione, you're a genius!" he exclaimed, receiving an irritated glare from the hawk-eyed librarian. The group spun to face the Boy-Who-Lived, excitedly staring at the stand of tabloids. The witch in question blushed somewhat, observing her best friend.

"Well, thank you for letting me know that, Harry." She replied, a look of uncertainty written over her rosy face. Harry furiously shook his head, gesturing frantically at the rack.

"No, no, no," he rectified, pulling a stray paper from the heap and holding it up for them to see. "Don't you see? It's here! The weapons are here!" This disclosure was met with baffled expressions as he wildly waved The Olympic Herald before their faces. Ron squinted at the headline, elevating an eyebrow.

"Winged Horse Delivers Celestial Baby?" he recited, giving his friend a worried look. "Has the pumpkin juice finally gotten to you?"

"No, August!" Harry frenetically whispered under the glare of Madam Pince. "In the August edition of The Olympic Herald, there was a museum break in!" He enlightened the audience of confounded Paradors. "And after the article, there was an inventory of—"

"Artifacts," both Hermione and Ron answered. "Which had the weapons' descriptions in there!" Hermione completed the puzzle. The Bushy, brown-haired female pushed through the Smythe brothers and flung her arms around Harry's neck, wringing him firmly. "Harry, you're a mastermind!" A patronizing throat clearing forced Hermione to untangle herself from Harry's neck, and the six came to find Madam Pince glowering at them.

"If you would please find a seat and keep silent," she hissed stonily, "or I will personally refuse you entry into this institution ever again." Hermione sobered at the horrific warning, hastily leading the group to the nearest table.

Though Harry had found the article in the Herald on the weapons, the information was quite scarce than he had hoped. It only mentioned that the weapons were influential in Greek and Celestial history, but nothing else. The newspaper was so badly worn; Harry couldn't even make out the rest of the information.

Thus, they found themselves once more combing books for any information they could find, however little it was. Harry sighed in defeat; he had hoped his discovery would have opened doors for them to access any more information. But it seemed, like every night spent here before this, it was impossible to find any additional facts. Ron was already teary-eyed from reading through close to twenty books; Hermione tirelessly scoured every text she put her hands upon, for once disregarding the essay she planned to finish tonight. The Celestials were furiously typing on their oLinks for any information, while he scanned Ancient Assistance. Gryffindor and Paraffin jumpers and ties were strewn about their stiff seats, and Ron's tie was hanging low toward his chest.

As the hour neared the closing time of the library, Harry heard the first sound of hope since he had found the newspaper hours ago. "I've found it!" Hermione spoke loud enough to jolt Ron from his sleep. The redhead gripped his head in exhaustion, and wiped his eyes of sleep.

"Bloody hell, Hermione," he began, tugging his tie to hang loosely under his throat. "Give a bloke a warning next time." The others hovered around Hermione and the dense book as if it were a beacon in their dark world. "Well, what does it say?" Ron prodded, leaning on his elbows over the Gryffindor. Harry and Kaltag scooted closer, lifting themselves slightly out of their seats as Nikola and Starbuck sat back in relief. Hermione's toothy smirk was reassurance enough for Harry that they had found exactly what they had been looking for. With a short clearance of her throat, Hermione's brown eyes remained on the marked page of Profiles in Valor: Victorious Magical Warriors, as she began the dulcet words everyone was elated to finally discover.

"What seems to be the most highly regarded weapons of their time, the Ravenstone Scepter and the Sword of Amenophus, have a history as checkered as the Being who created them, one Areus Youngblood . . . ."

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(1)Means they're the Entities of Influence and Discord.

A/N: Another chapter, another satisfied author. Harry's a prat in this one, I know. Very detailed chapter, I know. Harry's got Celestial powers (!), I know. All will be revealed in time. REVIEW.

A/N 2: Revised chapter.

Chapter Sixteen Preview:

- 1). The Biography of Areus Youngblood.
- 2). What's our favorite headmaster up to nowadays?
- 3). Another prophecy...and it isn't from Trelawney.

## Chapter Sixteen: The Biography of Areus Youngblood

"So he's a Being." Ron commented. "Go on, see if we can find anything." Hermione cleared her throat, placing her finger on the next sentence.

"Records state Areus Youngblood was brought forth into the world sometime in 1034 C.E. to a reclusive and unhinged Entity, and a compulsive wizard merchant, Melville Youngblood. The remarkable warrior, known especially for his passivity, died in 1112 C.E. at the side of his successor. "

"Hmph." Nikola snorted in derisive amusement. "Can't go wrong there." Starbuck nudged her to be silent as the bushy-haired prefect went on.

"Not much is known about Youngblood's parentage, but it is cogitated the ruler's mother was indeed a Soothsayer, which may establish the warrior's Oracle status."

Hermione looked up from the reading to catch their eyes. "So he was a Seer." She clarified. The thick library doors opened to allow a diligent individual in, but Harry paid little attention.

"With a mother who was off her rocker." Ron added, rubbing his cheek.

"Go on, then." Harry prompted, furrowing his eyebrows in pensiveness at a group of exiting Ravenclaws looking their way.

"How many Celestials of old cannot recall this Seer, is beyond many experts. Youngblood forewent education at the established Aripedes Academy of Celestiality, instead choosing to remain with his wizard father. The boy's father was not keen on the Celestial world at the time, resolving to keep his son by his side to evade the dangers of the world of Beings and Entities. His reasons were only justified when Youngblood received a rather chilling vision (then, at age ten) of his parents' future deaths, during a visit with his mother. His father resorted to teaching him useful spells and transfigurations as an invariable during their frequent relocations.

"Historical parchments state the future ruler had a rough childhood, filled with constant transfers and quarrels between both unwed

parents. In a journal ruin uncovered recent centuries ago, a twelve-year-old Youngblood writes, "Tis not enough father and I shift from site to site quite often; when mother surges in, I must endure their riotous variances...." The rest of his alleged collection of journals has not been discovered as of yet.

"At aged fourteen, Youngblood's father was killed by the current Being of Strife, Horus, who had come to collect the boy to be murdered. Unbeknownst to Youngblood, Horus had encountered Youngblood's mother's last divine prophecy (said to be the downfall of Horus' malevolent kingdom), before he slew her and went to gather the boy. Youngblood escaped to Greece, where not much is known about his experience. It is known, however, that years later, the Oracle-in-self-training became the ruler of Thessaloniki, Greece, presiding over the land and its people. None knew of Youngblood's true background, as he chose to live a true Muggle lifestyle.

"Visions were few and far between, merely of upcoming Celestial and Wizarding battles and wars, but Youngblood was not interested in such things. Only when his clean land was punctuated by sinister evildoings, and when his beloved people began dying gruesomely did Youngblood take it upon himself to cleanse the land of evil. Thus were created his signature weapons, the Ravenstone Scepter, and the Sword of Amenophus. Though few historians believed these arms were genuine, most Celestial and wizard experts deem them myth and nonexistent.

"The Ravenstone Scepter was theoretically created by Areus Youngblood in 1073 in Thessaloniki, Greece. He created it to destroy all evil in the small city, for at this time the reign of terror by the Being of Strife had just reached its pinnacle. The deaths of three thousand Celestials, Wizards, and Muggles worldwide took its toll on the young ruler, prompting him to purportedly create the aforementioned Ravenstone Scepter, which somehow decimated Horus and his terrible empire.

"Though the Scepter was created only for the use of good, legend states the descendents of Youngblood used it mostly for evil, with the intention to destroy a force of good. The Scepter, however, was ostensibly lost with its last master, Percival Houndstooth, in the Battle of 1489 against a distant descendent of Merlin. Both died at each other's hand, bearing no trace of the scepter anywhere. Olympian historians find it most comical that a weapon used

intentionally for good found itself in the hands of evil. The Ravenstone Scepter, though professed myth, has still not been seen today."

"Until now." Harry muttered under his breath, earning several nods from his housemates. Ron gruffly sighed, shaking his head.

"Why's it always now? Can't they wait until we've gone from school?" he grumbled, pulling his tie looser. Across the library, Harry spotted Kenward walking out with several tattered, leather-bound books and parchments; he hadn't seen the Defense professor enter earlier. The professor caught his eye and gave him an acknowledging nod before leaving.

"Legend has it, that the Ravenstone Scepter has the ability to transform into another smaller form, so simple, it is sometimes unbeknownst to the wearer and those around them. Its designated protector guards it, and its protector is also the wielder of the Scepter. Its power is unfamiliar to the wearer, unless it unveils itself at the time of present danger, or when it is in the presence of the purest evil. The Ravenstone Scepter also protects the wearer, keeping him or her safe from harm. It deflects all spells in very present danger—Celestial and wizardkind—and reveals itself against the darkest of curses, jinxes, and hexes, at the wearer's conscious or unconscious behest. It is rumored the scepter has an unconscious nervous connection with its wielder's mind, yet the wearer has no notion of it."

"With a weapon that powerful, it's no wonder You-Know-Who wants it." Ron gulped, his face deadening a pasty shade of white.

"Anything else?" Kaltag induced, shifting his elbows beside the unspeaking Harry's.

"Though the wearer can be either male or female, most of the wearers have in fact been predominantly male, with the exceptions of Katrina Rivendark, who evidently passed it on to her daughter, Anna Houndstooth. The aforementioned female was the mother of Percival Houndstooth, the last theorized wearer and wielder of the Ravenstone Scepter.

"The Scepter itself is considered silver in color. The gemstone is smooth, obsidian-like, with an odd onyx stone. As rumor states it,



when the wearer is provoked in a deadly situation, the Scepter assumes its full size, which, from archaeologists' conclusions (their excavation of what is purported to be Youngblood's title room), is about eighteen inches in length."

Harry's quill went to work quickly jotting down the description of the weapon. Perhaps Dumbledore had hid the weapons out in the open, where no one would think to look. He was, after all, an eccentric wizard with an affinity for ill-behaved enigmas.

"The Ravenstone Scepter can be used more than once, and can remain with the wearer until death. The wearer is not required to wear it indefinitely, though it is recommended. Myth reports Areus Youngblood kept it in a brass case in his home, and the onyx stone glowed blackish-tangerine when trouble was abound. When worn, the Scepter has unearthly warmth. And in the presence of the utmost evil, the Scepter is colder than ice.

"The descendents of Youngblood implemented ongoing attempts to destroy all good in the land at the time. All have tried and failed. What made Youngblood so successful was he was pure of heart, filled with courage, and full of compassion for others. The Scepter will only work (supposedly) for the wielder containing these things. Then will he or she be able to destroy or purge the evil, and the evil within others."

"The Sword of Amenophus' inception is more inexplicable than that of its creator's. Alleged to have been styled in 1074 by Youngblood, the young ruler of Thessaloniki, Greece, Youngblood's kingdom was on the verge of war. His city was between two aggressive settlements in Greece and nearby Macedonia. Accounts state Youngblood was constantly presumed an ally for either side, yet the warrior would not allow his people to fight. In his frustration from the badgering townships, he apparently forged the Sword of Amenophus, baptized for the name of his most trusted confidant and companion, his owl.

"Amenophus was professed to be a sharp, two-edged sword, the blade glowing bright red when evil loomed, and was capable of disarming a multitude without bloodshed. The Sword of Amenophus was rumored to have been fashioned after a wand: its core was a mixture of Youngblood's hair, his owl's tail feather, the last discarded feather of a phoenix in its final life, and the first shed hairs of a

unicorn foal. Many specialists speculate the presence of what is possibly a fifth element, the first shorn hairs of his true heir, fathered by his confidential parish lover, whose name cannot be determined due to the poor state in which a personal missive of Youngblood's was found."

Hermione paused, muttering the contents of the saber's core to herself once more, scribbling them down, and worrying her bottom lip. "That's very old magic," she stated in reflection. "I've never heard of such a powerful combination for a wand's foundation." The green-eyed wizard lowered his eyebrows, jotting down what he needed onto his piece of parchment.

"Youngblood obviously knew what he was doing." Starbuck answered, tilting his head to read upside down.

"Youngblood presumably used this sword as a wand in desolate times, and its product is considered twelve times the effect of a normal wand. The use of the Sword of Amenophus was only mentioned once in history, seemingly when Youngblood cast a Compliancy Charm on the warring townships to keep the amity among them.

"It is speculated Youngblood foresaw many of the major occurrences not only in his life, but the future. On his deathbed in the early twelfth century, Youngblood foretold what was conjectured to be the wizarding wars of the twentieth century, describing a "serpentine personage challenging the side of good." Though he did not reveal if good or evil prevailed, Youngblood did also predict the battle of an adversary against "an innocent child, safeguarded from truth of great magnitude, and more powerful than the world of Celestials and Wizards collectively," who he penned the 'Blesséd Child-Phoenix,' or the 'Child of Phoenix.' This theoretical "definitive warrior for the side of light" would supposedly obtain Youngblood's mythical armaments in their quest for peace and virtue. Incidentally, Youngblood also foretold his trusted owl would assist the Child of Phoenix in their quest to assist humanity."

Separate pairs of eyes slid in his direction as this was mentioned, and Harry only cleared his throat in answer. Tightening his grip on his quill, Harry motioned for Hermione to resume.

"The ruler of Thessaloniki died as expected, peacefully in 1112 C.E. at the age of seventy-eight. What was exceptionally odd was how Youngblood separated his possessions. The Ravenstone Scepter, as well as the kingdom of Thessaloniki, was allegedly handed to his Celestial royal advisor's relations, to be kept safe, ruled and used well; yet Youngblood was not aware of his advisor's true sinister loyalties, and thus began the scepter's journey into several evil hands. The Sword of Amenophus, however, was ostensibly given to the unnamed rightful inheritor of Youngblood's empire, who to this day remains unknown."

Silence met the end of Hermione's long recitation as the five spectators stood straight and reflected over the information. Madam Pince was swooping down on working students nearby, nastily reminding them the library was closing in a few moments. Hurriedly cramming textbooks and parchment into their bags, the Paradors took up their loose garments and satchels, quickly exiting before Pince could reach them.

The six were oddly uncommunicative, walking the measured pace to their tower. Harry hung his head in absorbed thought, pondering about what he had just discovered. The weapons were more powerful than anything on earth. Theoretically, they say, thought the Boy-Who-Lived irreverently. And this prophesied Child of Phoenix...it couldn't be him, could it? Harry passed a dry hand through his disordered mane, and sighed. They had dug themselves into a deeper pit. He hadn't missed the looks the group gave him at the mention of the Child of Phoenix, but Harry only hoped this Child was exactly so: a child.

Narrowing his emerald orbs at the carpet, Harry nodded firmly to himself, and took a sharp left turn down the familiar corridor. The collective assembly paused upon realizing the wizard was missing, flapping their eyelids in confusion.

"Tower's this way, Harry." Ron reminded, repressing a yawn. The prefect feigned cupping his hand around his ear toward the Tower's direction. "Can't you just hear the beds calling? We need some kip, mate." But Harry advanced down the passageway, approaching the staircase.

"It'd be hard to have an important conversation with all that racket," he replied, loud enough to echo through the hallway. "The Room of

Requirement is much quieter." The five glanced among each other in perplexity, before following the Defense Association leader. Ron rolled his brown eyes toward the heavens, trudging sleepily after.

As the sextet climbed the staircase in silence, Harry dwelled on all they had learned, combined with what they knew. They knew the weapons were on their side, and that Voldemort and Mystikos were seeking them; they were aware of the fact the weapons were indeed powerful enough to range on either side. One thing nagged at Harry's mind: if both weapons were separated for centuries, how is it they are together and under Dumbledore's caring?

The seventh floor corridor came into view, and Harry headed for the wall opposite the tapestry. The others watched in a tense manner (Ron in exhaustion, resting on the wall with his tired body leaning against it for support) as the green-eyed wizard paced persistently and opened the newly materialized door.

Tonight, the Room of Requirement held comfortable davenports before a roaring fireplace, and a small rectangular table in the center of the room. The only source of light was from the hearth and a festooned, archaic candelabrum with glinting flames in the center of the board table. Ron was pleased to note the appearance of salted biscuits with pitchers of pumpkin juice and goblets on the cherry side tables. As the keeper sat down with a biscuit-laden salver on his lap, the others helped themselves to the pumpkin juice; only Starbuck grumbled about wishing the juice were coffee. After taking the proffered chalice of drink from Kaltag, Harry sank into the couch, sipping broodingly.

"Ron, you just ate a few hours ago." Hermione scolded squalidly. The other prefect gave her a scandalized look, clutching the golden plate closer to his abdomen. He munched with fervor, swallowing several clumps of masticated food.

"Key phrase: 'few hours ago.'" He spoke in an offended tone. Hermione shook her head in aversion, choosing to rummage through her bag rather than look at her associate. Gulping down a goblet of beverage, Ron sighed deeply and wiped his crumb-riddled mouth on his robe sleeve. His eyes seemed more alive and his composure more awake now that his stomach was satiated. As he set the salver back on the table, Ron threw Harry a winning smile. "So, about this Youngblood bloke."

"We know what the weapons are capable of from speculation," Hermione initiated, tapping her quill on parchment. "But the question is, where are they? And who has them now?" Harry nodded, swirling his drink for something to do.

"If the Scepter was in the hands of evil before, how did father get his hands on it?" Kaltag proposed, sinking farther in thought and into the chair. Harry set the goblet down, tilting his head in consideration.

"The book said Youngblood handed Amenophus down to his true blood heir." He began, tapering his eyes in reflection. "Mystikos told Voldemort the weapons were either with the Battalion's general, or its blood owner." He held gazes with the Celestials. "Does that mean he knows who the rightful heir of Youngblood is? And does your father?"

"Possibly." Starbuck answered, nibbling his bottom lip. "But who, and are they Celestial or Mortal, Wizard or Squib?"

"With this bloke, all four are a possibility." Ron mumbled, snatching up another biscuit and crunching it gratingly.

"And do they know?" Nikola added. "Have they been informed by Dumbledore that they contain highly sought after weapons?" Harry scoffed to himself, shaking his head imperceptibly, mumbling silently, "If left to Dumbledore..."

The clever witch crossed her legs, primly adjusting her skirt before looking at Harry pointedly. "And is this 'Blesséd Child-Phoenix,' myth or authentic?" The wizard directed his gaze at the thriving conflagration, pursing his lips.

"According to Youngblood, they're to receive these weapons." Kaltag spoke.

"True, but not all Seers are spot on." Hermione argued lightly.

"He seems like the real thing," the Being of Dreams and Fancies countered. "He did predict Voldemort's rise. What's not to say he's right about this Child of Phoenix?" Hermione actually appeared to consider the thought; the flames danced pensively across her auburn orbs.

"D'you think this Child of Phoenix is a student here at Hogwarts?" Hermione proposed silently, her attention on Harry who was watching as Nikola leaned on her brother's lap for supportive relaxation. The Gryffindor prefect rolled his eyes with a smirk.

"Naturally." He answered smugly. "You ever known Hogwarts to turn out normal wizards and witches?" Harry produced a small grin at his best friend, despite Hermione's frown.

"Could be a Celestial." She indicated with an intimation of challenge. Ron merely shrugged in indifference.

"Could be." He replied, furtively glancing at his best friend.

"Or a Child." Harry defended incisively. "Or a defender in the far future. Perhaps a true phoenix, then?" Hermione wrinkled her thin brows at the Boy-Who-Lived and reduced her sharpened eyes.

"Figuratively speaking." She spoke slowly to the furrowed browed seeker. Harry calmly toyed with his sleeves, staring at the wavering fire in the hearth.

"So," he began, tearing his gaze away from the vacillating flames. "We know the weapons are extraordinarily powerful, and Voldemort has sent Death Eaters to look for it." Harry summarized, retaking the goblet of liquid in his hand. "Dumbledore definitely knows where they are and who has it. He probably even knows we're investigating this." Ron looked apprehensive at the revelation, as did Hermione and Starbuck. "And now we've got this Child of Phoenix foresight."

"Think the professors also know?"

"About the prediction?"

Ron shook his head ditheringly. "Doubt it, but about where Dumbledore's hid the weapons?"

"Only the most trusted." Hermione chimed in, scribbling notes down.

"Such as McGonagall and Snape." Harry determined, taking a great swig of pumpkin juice. Smacking his lips audibly at the sweetened

taste, Harry shook his glass to unsettle the liquid once more. The Celestials tiredly nodded in acquiescence with Harry's suggestion.

Gryffindor's keeper suddenly narrowed his eyes, quirking his mouth to the side in a frown. "You think You-Know-Who's sent someone as a spy?"

"Well, we know he's got spies here. Whether they're on the staff or a student, we've no idea." The witch took on with a puckered brow. "I just know they've got to be students. And no, we can't just outright accuse Malfoy and his followers, Ron." The redheaded wizard elevated and dropped his shoulders, taking the freshly refilled plate of biscuits back onto his knees.

"Worth a shot, anyway."

Hermione rocked her leg back and forth in deep contemplation, taking a moment to review her notes every now and then. "The book said Amenophus was used as a wand. And the core," she exclaimed, her eyebrows shooting into her thick fringe, "it's the most powerful and complex of old magicks I've ever encountered. I've read that firsts of anything in the magical world are exceptionally powerful. First unicorn foal hairs, and if this is true about the heir of his hair—I mean, the hair of his heir, then...wow." The witch chuckled in awe to herself. "With the addition of his hair, the phoenix's last feather, and his most trusted confidant's feather...let's just say these ingredients aren't used together in potions for a reason."

Harry's dark brows rose considerably. "You mean the effect would be that powerful?" Hermione nodded expertly, a smile gracing her lips.

"If there was a wand that powerful, I think it's safe to say Voldemort wouldn't stand a chance." It was then Harry realized why the Dark Lord wanted these weapons. By the sound of the Sword of Amenophus, it was an astonishingly powerful weapon. If he had his wasted hands on it, neither Dumbledore, nor Harry himself could stand in his way. And all that opposed would not live to see the next second.

"We need to get those weapons." He declared in a forced calm. "Or at least make sure they're protected well enough." Those present in the room seemed to understand Harry beyond his words, and

noded indomitably. "We need to start by researching more on the weapons themselves." He paused, reflecting on anything else that could help save countless lives. "And this prophesied Child of Phoenix. Anything in books and anyone we suspect." Only Ron's huff broke the sound of the crackling fire.

"Great. We spend weeks and weeks in the library searching, only to end up staying there and burying ourselves into more books with this 'Child of Phoenix.'" He complained, crossing his arms over his chest. "Instead of answers, we're only finding more questions." Harry creased his brows, awkwardly rubbing his calloused index finger over the jeweled surface of the chalice.

"Ron, I'm sure we'll figure this out." Hermione soothed in a professional tone, priggishly uncrossing her legs. "We only need to put more effort in finding the answers, that's all."

Ron scoffed in skepticism, but paused, suddenly raising his eyebrow shiftily at Harry. "Tell you what: we'll just save ourselves the time now: I bet Harry's this blessed child-phoenix." Harry simply stared at the salmon-hued drink in his cup, eyeing the dancing likeness of the hearth's flames. Slowly, he brought the cup to his lips, and drank deeply, the once sweet liquid now bitter on his tongue.

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Transfiguration was a frustratingly slow process as usual, since Harry was having a fair amount of trouble transfiguring his slippery common giant woodland slug into a giant crab. Ron seemed a bit green around the gills as he reunited with the oversized slugs, remembering his horrifying experience of belching hundreds of them in a curse gone terribly wrong against Malfoy in his second year. Hermione, so far, was the only successful one in the class, transforming all of her slugs into enthusiastic crabs, and various other small animate or inanimate items. Harry had succeeded thus far into turning his dispirited slug's exterior as hard as a crab's shell and back, but it was as far as it went. If anything, Ron's agitated slug seemed to get slipperier and its antennae were missing.

Hermione appeared to be restraining herself from commenting, much to Ron's relief. Harry assumed Ron didn't feel as if his fuse was long today, and the prefect probably knew he'd regret snapping at the clever witch over something so trivial. Professor McGonagall



was busy assisting a confused Neville, whose unnerved slug had apparently been emitting a sort of foul defensive slime any time the forgetful wizard trained his wand two inches near it. Ernie and Hannah from Hufflepuff were busily paging through their textbooks to find the counter spell to their vanished slugs; Seamus and Dean covered their wide smiles behind their hands as Pansy Parkinson tried in vain to stop her tiny, slothful creature from spitting out diminutive tufts of fire.

As Harry's dejected slug curled into a protective ball, the boy could only think about what they had learned the days prior. The weapons. Areus Youngblood. The Child of Phoenix. He closed his eyes momentarily, gripping his wand in frustration. Ron was right. The Gryffindor found he had more questions than answers about their research. Behind him, Icarus cursed under his breath, clinging to one of his fingers protectively.

"Bloody crab." He hissed, glaring at the sated creature scuttling away. Professor McGonagall took to making her usual rounds about the classroom, leaving Neville to defend against the now smoking, slick experiment. Harry shook out of his daydreaming to Hermione praising both Paraffin prefects rather stridently as Ron looked on in envy. Malfoy and his band of alleged Dark Lord apprentices glowered at the Parador side in disgust, their disenchanted slugs not even threatened by their wands. Harry's eyes were entirely locked on Malfoy's flopping, downcast slug; he hadn't noticed the redoubtable shadow of the Deputy Headmistress obscuring his light.

"Mr. Potter, if you would please pay attention to your own venture," she aimed her wand steadily at the escaping slug, a slippery trail of mucus secretion marking a path to the creature nearly hanging off of the table. Harry's eyes enlarged before he grabbed the disappointed slug in his hands and gave the Transfiguration professor a rueful smile. McGonagall thinned her lips tightly, glaring at her house student before moving on to evaluate Ron.

The Averins snickered to themselves, watching Harry bristle in annoyance. How was it McGonagall barely noticed their lack of work in her class, but always seemed to censure her own house? As the professor moved toward the decidedly Brittlebore/Hufflepuff side, Harry caught wind of the faint stream of curses issuing from Ron.

"How can I bloody pay attention with Malfoy mocking me?" he muttered furiously. "When did McGonagall become their head of house?" The prefect released a disgusted sigh, focusing instead on his anxious, titian slug. "Revolted things, these." Hermione shot Ron a quick glance, before resuming her lecture to Nikola about the transfiguring spell.

Harry poked his creature with his wand, watching as it flipped on its back and squirmed. "How did I ever pass the O.W.L. for Transfiguration? I can barely do this spell." The green-eyed boy sighed deeply, muttering the incantation over and over again. It only succeeded in making his experimental subject's flaccid outer surface harder. The slug went rigid completely, its wiggling antennae the only signal letting the young wizard know it was still alive. Across the room, McGonagall put out the fire on seething Pansy's robes, while the pleased blackened slug expelled dark smoke. Neville was apologizing feverishly to a pair of irate Voltaire and Paraffin Entities, sodden with putrid glop.

Ron observed Harry's motions and creased his brows, regarding his own red, exasperated slug. He firmly trained his wand a few inches from the test subject and murmured the spell cogently. Hermione spun around from animating her array of colorful crabs, now waltzing, and beamed at the apricot, snapping crab in place of Ron's slug. Harry's emerald eyes widened and divided themselves between the nipping pincers and the keyed up Ron, now at the center of attention on their side of the room.

"Brilliant, Ron." Icarus commented, pushing his haughty experiment with his wand. Kaltag and Nikola nodded, leaving Harry in shock, and Hermione in elation.

"Congratulations, Ron!" she excitedly remarked, wringing her hands in her lap. "Now, you won't have to do the essay." Ron beamed, leaning in his chair to review his work. Hermione gave Harry a sympathetic look, training her eyes on his stiff slug. "And Harry...oh, well...you've gotten quite far. Your slug seems to be showing signs of hope..." Harry languidly rapped his wand tip along the slug's back, grumbling to himself. He wondered why his specimen appeared more withdrawn than the others, with its earlier escape attempts. Narrowing his eyes at the glob of mucus twiddling its antennae sadly, Harry tilted his head in curiosity. The slug was...discouraged?

"Er, perhaps it doesn't want to..." Harry broke his gaze from the limp subject, catching Hermione's perplexed gaze. "I...he—it doesn't want to be...transfigured." The stares he received were nothing short of cautious incredulity, resulting in Ron leaning over the desk to thoroughly examine his somewhat damp countenance. The keeper eyed the slug warily before nodding reluctantly and sending Hermione a blatant look of concern. Though he went back to poring over his uncooperative slug, Harry could tell his best friends were throwing him furtive glances.

McGonagall called the class to attention and assigned those not fortunate enough to succeed in the spell to practice, and a twenty-inch assignment due next class. The students clambered noisily, some levitating their giant slugs back into their respective jars, others freezing their crabs and tossing it into a wooden crate. Neville still hadn't any luck with his woodland organism, and a piqued McGonagall waved at him dismissively, flicking her wand in swift succession at the creature to end its spouting of purple, fetid slime.

The sixth years spilled out into the corridor, chatting boisterously amongst each other and branching off into sundry directions. Irked Harry kept silent, nodding stiffly to the Smythes as they headed to a Celestial class. Flanked by a fretful Hermione and an effervescent Ron, Harry felt the familiar pangs of resentment toward his friends. It wasn't that he was envious of his ginger-haired co-captain in Transfiguration; Hermione was a walking archive, so it was long since he bore no bitterness toward her either. Rather, their carefree behavior over something so trivial as transfiguring an indolent slug into a snipping crustacean nagged at him. It was not important to the war, or what they were discovering.

Add to the fact he now was an amateur empath on the feelings of slugs and crabs, and Harry was further than befuddled and bothered. He pondered over the idea that nothing truly normal ever happened to him. Between talking to snakes, battling a dark wizard and his army, embracing his elemental ability, and his insatiable penchant for anything peculiar, the Boy-Who-Lived idly accepted the verity that he would never be normal.

"At least I'm not dreaming of long corridors and closed doors this year." He drably groused to himself.

It appeared Hermione had not failed to notice his disposition, and her stride toned down from flighty. "All right there, Harry?" The trio rounded the corner, avoiding a cluster of seventh year Slytherins. Harry swallowed thickly, gnawing on his tongue; although he felt bad for keeping his abilities from his best friends, Harry could not risk anything happening to them. Therefore, the untidy-haired wizard plastered on his finest blithe grin and shook his head. He was saved from vocalizing an untruth to Hermione's disbelieving demeanor when they abruptly ceased walking and Ron spoke.

"Oy, what's this?" he questioned with displeasure. The crowd steered toward the adjoining Charms corridor was a gridlock, and complaining wizards and Celestials crammed the tight area. Ron, naturally tall, only moved his head a fraction to catch a glimpse of what could have caused this. Both Hermione and Harry were stretching to look over the heads of fifth years. Harry detected the faint smell of pineapple and potatoes, and perplexingly looked to his best friends for responses.

Finally, when no one moved to rectify the situation, Hermione grumbled about nearing the time for Hagrid's class to start, squared her shoulders, and pushed through the crowd. Several students glared at her as she informed them she was a prefect who had the privilege to order whatever obstacle to cease and desist. Ron merely shook his head in disinclination, regarding his partner. "She's on her own with that one, mate."

Harry could see the crowds parting for the significant witch to pass; the low rumble of bewildered voices resounded in the passage, all accounting their version of the tale in progress unseen by their eyes. The unruly-haired wizard glimpsed something translucent near the large mass of white-cloaked Celestials at the front of the hall. The faint clanking of armor and a familiar sinister cackle made the boy hero narrow his emerald eyes slightly. Furthermore, a dim, divergent whinny and a shrill wail caused a chain reaction, making all individuals present in the corridor to clamp their hands over their ears and stoop as if something were on the verge of assaulting them.

Before Harry had the chance to fully guard his ears from the cacophonous racket, he heard Hermione's authoritative voice bellow in perplexity when the wail ended, "What on earth?" Several in the crowd suddenly jolted and shifted in a wave, as if being briefly possessed, before Harry felt an iciness wash over him for a split

second. He summed there were no Dementors around; perhaps a ghost?

"Vile delinquent!" Harry heard a familiar, animated tone belittle. "Dare you treat a lady as such, knave!" His hands were halfway to the sides of his head, whereas Ron had his completely covered, and he stared around in curiosity. Stilling his hands for a moment, Harry heard the telltale splatters of something viscous and liquid splattering on a hard surface. Hermione disgustedly made a sound of protest as the unseen figure crowed wildly.

"Peeves!" he heard his best friend shriek. "I should have known! What's the meaning of this? We need to get to class! And why are you attacking this portrait?" There was a clanking of armor and the terse swishing of a saber, after the witch ended her questioning.

"I am no mere portrait, milady!" the Gryffindor seeker heard the wound up tone of Sir Cadogan, the madcap knight in the painting, correct Hermione. "I am a defender of those in peril! A hero! A redeemer!"

"A lunatic," Ron added, rising to his full height beside Harry. Ruffling his vibrant ginger hair, he jerked his thumb behind them. "That was Myrtle that just passed by us." A look of pensiveness conquered his features before he lowered his brows. "Rather, through us. Can tell that shriek even if it's ninety kilometers into the Dark Forest." The two focused on Peeves' bouncy riddles as he leapt over those in the throng and bounded off the walls.

In no time, Filch was aggressively shoving through the horde, raving at the niggling poltergeist with his wrinkled fist shaking threateningly in the air, and Harry and Ron separated to let his hissing feline, Mrs. Norris, canter by. The naughty specter pinched his lucent nose, tugged his left ear a few times, and blew raspberries at the heated caretaker, zipping down the next corridor. Filch and his foul feline raced with alarming speed after him.

The students hesitantly resumed conversation, moving forward to their respective classes. Harry spotted the shaggy mane of the Gryffindor prefect, and the trio continued their walk. The boys grimaced at the oozing mashed potatoes, crushed pineapples, and—what Harry hoped was—gravy, not only smattered on Sir Cadogan's portrait, but along the entire corridor. Cadogan's fat,

dapple-gray pony stood in another scenic portrait, grazing unflappably in the verdant pasture; the subject of the canvas was missing.

"Peeves," Hermione spat his name out with distaste. "Nicked food from the kitchens and chased Myrtle down here." Ron whistled low in his throat, taking in the unpleasant scene. As they passed, numerous portraits could be heard and scarcely seen with visiting subjects, arguing and pointing at their ruined images.

"Explains why he was painting with food," he joked quietly. "And why Moaning Myrtle swept through the crowd like a winter draft." The three made it to the entrance hall and stepped into the chilly November zephyr under the melancholy sky.

"He was teasing Myrtle mercilessly, and Sir Cadogan tried to defend her." The annoyed witch continued, leading the young wizards down the sloping hill after a group of Hufflepuffs to Hagrid's hut.

"And they say chivalry is dead." Harry couldn't help but shrewdly remark, receiving a chuckle from Ron and a disparaging look from Hermione.

The friends were the last to join the select group of students, gathered fretfully around Hagrid's gate. Harry was pleased to remember the only Slytherin present was Theodore Nott from the Elite Defense Association, with one Ravenclaw, two Hufflepuffs, and every Gryffindor sixth year excluding Parvati and Lavender.

Only six Celestials were present, as select others either took an advanced forest venture on the weekends with their Celestial guide. Or, others opted to independently study, taking the exam at the appointed time at the end of the year. Erec, Basil, and Isis were presently hanging toward the back, nervously smiling at the approaching Gryffindors. The door to the affable half-giant's hut slammed open, thwacking against the stone wall with a loud slap. The group of students twitched, tensely taking a step backward, their eyes never leaving the dark entrance.

Slowly, tattered-robed Professor Lykaeos emerged, his cupped chin carefully tilted at a gradient toward the sun, and a large, sharp blade deftly shearing the coarse, dry hairs on his disfigured cheek. The

rumple-haired wizard noted Ron's bobbing throat in his peripheral vision as the Celestial continued to shave himself.

Professor Xylon Lykaios was—as a vindictive joke by nature—an eccentric man. The Celestial students described him as rather unhinged and impulsive, two mannerisms Harry never desired to unearth in one person. He kept the sixth years decidedly on edge with his harrowing tales of death defiance and survival, usually ending with some gruesome act. Harry found it hard to believe he cut his own leg off seven times, when they were always present at the time of his fable.

Not only did he exaggerate enough to make even Gilderoy Lockhart flinch, he was also skillful in the art of refusing to make sense when he spoke. Though students rumored he sometimes hunts big game nocturnally in the forest (inadequately clad and covered in dirt and dead leaves for camouflage) Harry somehow couldn't bring himself to doubt it. The Paraffins attributed his laxity to the fact he was aging, and now frenziedly sought various ways (no matter how demented and dangerous) to keep himself youthful, spry, and occupied. Or, it could have been one excursion too many after the magical and Celestial worlds' most dangerous creatures. Run-ins with Manticores, Nundus and the like were sure to leave someone off the plot.

After listening to the unnerving sound of metal scraping the pointy stubble on the older Being's face for more than they would have enjoyed, Hagrid's large form surfaced from the bungalow entrance. Lykaios scowled somewhat at the objectionable looks on the wizards' and Celestials' faces, and bared his yellowing teeth.

"Survival," he growled, tracing a path on his scarred face. "Is the worst fear anyone could ever face." Hermione slanted her head slightly with a blank look on her face, mimicked by Ron and the rest of the class. He slid his large, rust-speckled knife into its shabby leather sheath, and brandished his gnarled finger at his face. "A night in the Longroot Fores'," he began mistily. Hermione issued a quiet sigh, shaking her head resignedly. "All by meself, when me men abandoned me for 'em Sirens." The instructor scoffed derisively growling at a memory, his cobalt orbs brutish. "Odys'sus, the supposed Greek hero led me men to 'ere doom, fallin' after 'em vixens...good Zeus, roas'ed Siren flesh was a delicacy back 'n Olympus when I was king..."

Ron clamped a hand over his grinning mouth to keep himself from laughing aloud, while Harry rolled his eyes toward the gray sky. The class heard Fang's booming barks from within, and with a whine, the boarhound leapt out of the hut and shot off behind the hovel. Ron's cheeks were matching the color of his hair as his shoulders shook with mirth when Hagrid cleared his throat with a rumble. Lykaios spun around as if seeing the half-giant for the first time and fixed his frayed robe untidily. Hagrid's beetle-black eyes twinkled with Ron's shared jollity, and the gathered group could make out a smile under his tangled beard.

"Ev'ry one'll be follow'n me, righ'," he announced heading to the back where the enclosure and Fang were behind his house. The class reluctantly followed, not trusting Hagrid with magical animals as Lykaios with their lives.

Ron was chanting under his breath, his eyes half-hooded, "Please let it be a giant flobberworm, please let it be a giant flobberworm..." Inwardly, Harry agreed. He knew the collective group wouldn't enjoy another untamed animal Hagrid caught or bought like last session.

The sixth years had the enormous misfortune of meeting an infant Graphorn, complete with short, and yet sharp horns and a fierce attitude. Harry could see why trolls used them as 'horses;' even the youngest ones were six feet tall and just as wide. Though Hagrid's babying techniques were of nil assistance, the Graphorn remained calm; until the worst occurred. The sixth years were run ragged as the Graphorn chased the lot of them the entire period, attempting to buck the madly grinning Lykaios off of its rough, grayish purple, humped back.

Winced at the recollection, Harry's eyes widened when he eyed the lazily coiled, violently orange, black-banded, three-headed snake lounging in the corner. He occasionally spotted a rosy, forked tongue flicking out at regular intervals from the trio of heads. The right head eyed the assembly critically, lifting from the ground to hiss threateningly. Fang was stretched out on the dirt near the firewood, sighing wearily and closing his shiny auburn eyes.

"A Runespoor." Hermione spoke out doubtfully.

"Righ' yeh are, Hermi'ne, righ' yeh are." Hagrid beamed, motioning to the serpent. "Runes'pers come from Africa, specific'ly from a



small country there. Don' as' me where it 'xactly is, I don' be knowin' such." From the size of its heads, Harry estimated it to be about five or six feet in length, or standard Muggle snake size.

Ron sighed in defeat, quirking his jaw. "Great; now we'll be spending all class learning about Slytherins." The students turned to face the lone member of the serpent house, hanging near Hagrid with a bored look on his face. Ron simply shrugged, stating, "No offense, Nott."

"None taken, Weasley." Lykaios ambled toward the small corral, eyeing the snake dismally.

"Caught a Chim'era, an' it chomped both me legs off this morn," he declared, as if merely commenting on the weather. Fang gradually raised his head and sloped his massive face to the side, staring at the gray-haired man. "But Dumbled'ere and Chir'n wouldn' let me keep it, 'specially fer this class." Slowly, Harry rotated his green eyes in vexation. Fang issued a heaving sigh and set his head on his paws.

Seamus straightened a bit, snickering at the prattling Being. "He's a few flobberworms short o' the funny farm." The other boys sniggered quietly, receiving unkind looks from Prefect Granger.

"Ah," Hagrid looked at his colleague strangely. "As yeh can see, the righ' head righ' here," he pointed shortly to the hissing cephalic serpent, "is commonly known as the evaluatin' one." Neville rushed to rummage through his bag for parchment and a quill. Ron tapped on Harry's shoulder with a smirk.

"Hermione." Ron leaned over to whisper in the raven-haired wizard's ear. The Gryffindors chortled under their breath, earning a reproachful look from Hermione. "See what I mean?" The professor then gestured to the resting left head. Professor Lykaios gripped the wooden bars of the enclosure fence with his crooked and wrinkled hands, staring at the serpent with hungry eyes.

"The left 'un is the 'planner,' makin' plans an' whatnot fer the three." Hagrid went on, breaking his gaze with the class to keep an eye on the questionable man. Ron drummed his fingers across his bottom lip and trained his smallest finger on the left head.

"That'd be you, then, Harry." He jested, grinning at the frown on Harry's face. Hermione cleared her throat, facing her head in Hagrid's direction. Seamus and Dean took to leaning on a large pine tree beside Nott as the rest of the class fidgeted restlessly. Neville and Isis shared a large boulder, avidly taking notes on the lecture.

"Th' middle 'un is the 'dreamer.' He'll keep the Runes'per qui' still for days, lost in th' imagination an' visions." Harry and Hermione simultaneously turned their heads to their third member with smirks on their faces.

"Ron." They named in unison. The redhead glowed bright scarlet, bowing his head in embarrassment.

"Now, abou' the left an' middle, they're vicious 'uns at tha'. They'll turn on the righ' head an' kill 'im, because he's a pest when he reviews." Hagrid spoke, ignoring the murmuring Lykaeos' confession of baiting the alleged Chimaera until his legs were in its mouth. The brilliantly apricot serpent twitched its tail, and the other resting heads left the ground to fully look at the students. Several stumbled back from the pen, and Neville rolled painfully off the boulder. Hagrid beamed at the snakes, rocking on the balls of his massive feet. "Oh, bless 'em, they wan' to meet you." He faced the class with confusion, deducing most of them were farther than the last time he looked at them. "Don' be shy, c'mon."

"I choose life, thank you very much." Anthony Goldstein murmured cooly. The right head continued to hiss unfavorably, watching as the students staggered to the safety of the side yard.

"Any idea what it's saying, mate?" Ron queried softly, judging the reptile closely. Harry blinked, suddenly remembering he had been ignoring the nagging fact that he could speak Parseltongue.

"Oh," he replied dumbly, lowering his brows. He was sensing conflicting emotions not just from the trio of serpents, but surprisingly, from Fang, too. He really needed to talk to Kaltag about the normalcy of this ability. "Uh...the left is interested in us," he tried to describe what he was perceiving without using his ability as a Parselmouth. "The middle is simply curious, and of course, the right is hostile." Hermione gave the wizard an odd look, taking one long glance at the creature before observing the co-captain.

"They said that?" she questioned skeptically, folding her arms across her chest. The hissing from the snakes gradually turned more lucid, until Harry could finally understand what they were saying.

"Why is it the humans look at us so?" the left head asked, its cleft tongue flitting out to taste the air of its surroundings. The middle's frightening amber eyes swept the course group with a gentle swing of its head, before its tongue emerged lazily.

"I can sense their fright. It reeks from them like fetid carcass." Harry raised an eyebrow at the middle, biting his lip at the comment. The unreceptive right head jeered, continually hissing and now, baring its pair of long, two-inch fangs.

"They are a threat to us!"

"Perhaps we should inspect closely," the planner informed, waving its head at the two. "Escape this holding, we must."

"They are young and alarmed, duly so. Possibly a flight of fancy into the mind's eye of what will become of us when we encounter them?" The dreamer suggested. The critic gibed angrily.

"We are in peril." Harry had to snort at the remark. "They will trample us, the two-limbed monsters! A strategy will seldom assist us!" The three hissed amongst one another, discounting Hagrid's motherly cooing and Lykaos' Greek babble.

"Harry?" Ron called, staring down at his friend with concerned brown eyes. "What is Hermyon saying?" Harry froze, staring at his comrade with wide eyes. Hermione shook with rage, her turbulent brown eyes tempestuous, and her hair seemed to crackle with magic.

"Excuse me?" Hermione inquired calmly, her hands now on her hips. "You didn't name that thing after me, did you Ronald Weasley?" The youngest Weasley brother grinned and proudly nodded.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? They're us in one." Hermione scoffed disbelievingly, gesturing wildly to the serpent.

"Oh, sure!" she exclaimed sardonically. "They're us all right. Forgive me if I don't keep it and—and name it after us!" Ron's mouth hung open and his eyes squinted at the witch.

"Well, it makes sense, you have to admit," The class was slowly turning to watch the bickering prefects. "You're the critic, that makes you the right; Harry's the planner, of course; and you said it yourself, I'm the dreamer; don't know why, but I apparently am!" Harry suddenly realized why Hermione and Ron occasionally had these lengthy periods of separation after an argument; Ron apparently enjoyed the taste of his foot in his mouth.

"Not like I wanted you to name it after us! Me!" she threw back in upset, her cheeks now glowing crimson. Her fellow prefect exclaimed, balling his hands into fists.

"It sounded better than Peasler!" Harry had to confess; that had to be the dumbest comeback he had ever heard. The students were furtively looking at each other, while Harry could still hear the Runespoor squabbling in Parseltongue.

Hermione threw a dark look at Prefect Weasley amidst the fanatical hissing of Hermyon. "How old are you again, Ron?" The Quidditch keeper only had time to bristle slightly before his retort was stemmed.

"How about we just name it Trio?" Seamus suggested diffidently. Murmurs of approval spread through the host of pupils as both prefects glared at them.

"T-Trio's smart with me," Harry added, hoping to end the pointless argument. "Unless Hagrid's already named it...them." A sudden look of bafflement crossed the brown-haired witch's face, as she inclined her head.

"Right," she finally uttered, allowing a reluctant, however victorious smile to remain on her face. "Or we can just call it Malfoy." Harry spotted Slytherin Nott breaking his face into a grin as Ron smirked.

"Now, there's an idea."

"Chim'era torn off me legs," Lykaos grouched quietly, his manic eyes wide and staring accusingly at the Runespoor. "Torn up me good

huntin' breeches, too. Woulda been great wi' some Manticore pap...."

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"I think he's amazingly intelligent, and exciting," inquisitive Luna Lovegood bolstered, lathing a blemish on her wrist with margarine. Ron paused with a biscuit halfway to his mouth to observe her in blatant disbelief. Hermione meticulously sliced her small cutlet and scoffed.

"I won't question his prior intelligence, but Professor Lykaios is in no shape to be teaching at all." She contradicted, placing the brown meat into her mouth. Harry calmly sipped his pumpkin juice and watched as Luna scraped away excess butter from her skin and rubbed it in. Ginny and Luna had arrived late from Defense Against the Dark Arts to lunch, and it appeared the protuberant-eyed Ravenclaw had no desire to sit amongst her house today. Instead, she found the trio's conversation about Lykaios rather interesting, and chose to put in her two Knuts.

Luna elevated a chiseled, flaxen eyebrow and watched the intellectual witch carefully. "I think he's perfectly fine to teach. He was telling us about the mating habits of Mackled Malaclaws last week." Her eyes took on an excited light. "Did you know—?"

"Nutter's completely lost the plot," Ron started with conviction, but altered his statement when he saw Luna's deflated features. "But I'm sure he's...um, legally sane..."

"Doubt it." Ginny mumbled behind her roll.

"Lykaios may be legally sane, but not enough to teach a group of students." Hermione completed the thought, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with her handkerchief. Luna's round eyes narrowed somewhat and her cheeks reddened with hurt. Harry pushed the peas on his plate around nervously.

"Well, I think he's fascinating." She whispered breathily to no one in particular. Hermione, seeing what her witty tone had gotten her into, exhaled in irritation, and her hard brown eyes regarded the wistful fifth year.

"I'll give you that," she stated, watching as Luna's hunched head shot up and a smile spread across her face, "but how's he supposed to help with O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s with his wild stories?"

"Don't tell me you're on about that already!" Ron groaned. "We've got more than a year to worry about them."

"Ravenclaw's had quite a few breakdowns already," Luna added, swirling her pumpkin juice as if she were a wine connoisseur. "In fifth, sixth, and seventh year." Ginny nodded in support, flicking her rice dejectedly at her brother.

"Vicky Frobisher's already been to the infirmary, and Tess Kaenslar is on the verge." The red headed female Weasley enlightened. More students poured into the Great Hall for lunch and sat at their house tables.

"Padma Patil and Lisa Turpin are still there," Luna put in. "Had a breakdown over Muggle Studies. And I thought I heard Corner say Chang's in there." Harry interestedly looked up at his old semi-flame's mentioning.

"I don't see why a frenzy's already started." Ginny tiredly spoke. "We haven't even reached Christmas."

"It's not even June yet." He muttered while Ron nodded. "Ernie's told me Zacharias is taking a Calming Tonic every day."

"I heard Hazel Gresham from Brittlebore's on bed rest." Nikola butt in, taking the vacant seat beside Hermione. "And Thorne Fuller from Aves was so frustrated, he threw a tantrum in Floras." Kaltag and Starbuck filled the remaining empty spaces, readily pulling food onto their bare salvers with fervor.

"Selene's told me Guan-yin, Naren, Esteban, and Carmichael passed out at various intervals during examinations." Kaltag included, slurping the gravy from his coated index tip. Luna paused her potato sculpting and tilted her head at the crimson-haired prefect's news and furrowed her brows.

"I heard they cursed each other in frustration." She shrugged, resuming her sculpture of what seemed to be a wobbly sword with a

corn kernel encrusted hilt. Harry glanced at the carving, then at the blonde Ravenclaw before shaking his head.

"The F.O.R.C.E.s weren't that hard."

"Says the Being with the second highest score in history." Nikola griped, pulling a newspaper from her bag. Kaltag smirked cheekily, twirling his spoon in his mashed potatoes.

"And don't you forget it."

"Read the paper, then?" Ron spoke with anguish, making a face at the black and white image of the bellowing Minister Fudge. Harry surmised if the photograph had been in color, the man's cheeks would have been vermilion, and steam would have been billowing out of his ears. The others murmured their distasteful concurrence, glaring at the paper in disgust.

"Dumbledore's been trying all he can," Starbuck informed, tucking his arm under his periwinkle cloak. "Fudge isn't budging."

"Figures. Einar says Fudge doesn't want the Celestial world to permanently be a part of the wizarding world." Ginny growled, standing up with Luna. The fifth years left the table quickly to head to their next class. After glancing around furtively for any eavesdroppers, Harry leaned in close to the Smythes.

"Any luck?" Starbuck shook his head.

"Not in the standard shelves. Our best bet is the Restriction Section." Harry sat back with a look of dissatisfaction. The only way they could use the Restricted Section was a signed note from one of their professors, stating the purpose of their search. No teacher would allow them entry with their excuse; besides, Harry couldn't alert any of them that they knew about the weapons.

"Well, it's over, then." Ron threw up his hands before tucking them under his chin. "We can't go in there unless we break in or a teacher gives us permission. None of the above is likely to happen."

The black-haired teenager frowned deeply, tracing his smooth chin hairs with his thumb. Ron was, of course, accurate. They couldn't let on that they knew, and a midnight gambol in the Restricted Section

was riskier than lying to a professor. Madam Pince was no fool. If they retained an legitimate notice from a teacher, it was pertaining to a particular book subject; and if they told her it was for a project, she'd without a doubt lift her sharp nose to the high ceiling and owl or Floo the instructor for secondary confirmation. And, Harry mused gloomily, there were no classes at Hogwarts that he knew of specializing in ancient relics.

"Our best bet would be History of Magic, but even that wouldn't fool Pince." He vocalized, ruffling his already unruly hair. "For starters, Ron and I aren't in the class."

"And I doubt Einar would give Kaltag a signed approval." Nikola agreed. Kaltag shook his head, forking a portion of steak.

"A notice for expulsion, yes." He dismally stated, moodily bringing the goblet to his lips. Ron was occupied with the newly arrived Ella Burton; from Harry's observation opposite her, he determined she was ill. Her skin was milky white, and she appeared fairly clammy, rubbing her arms constantly through her long, dark Gryffindor cloak. Her scarlet hair stood out against her ivory skin, and her brown eyes seemed duller, and less lively.

"You all right?" Kaltag questioned, leaning over four others to inquire as to the witch's condition. Ella gave him a less than reassuring smile, adding a nod into the mix.

"A bit under the weather," she confessed, rubbing her temples. "Nothing to worry about." Ron gave the sixth year an incredulous look, sputtering in dissent.

"You're not on about examinations too, are you?" the young lady shook her head weakly. "Then you can skive off classes, you realize? One's not going to kill you." The redheaded Gryffindor simply giggled feebly, smiling at Ron with something akin to sisterly gratitude.

"Thanks, but I think I must go." She replied, massaging her forehead. "I've a bothersome head, but I mustn't miss this afternoon's class." Ron and Harry balked at her determination to go to their afternoon class, Divination. Her eyes took on a sort of faraway, reticent look, as if she had seen something dreadful. "I've a feeling I must...be there. There might be something to use. Sibley's instructing today."



Harry nodded in remembrance, producing a small grin. It had been a while since Trelawney relented the floor to Professor Sibley; she freely, but grudgingly gave up their class for the other teachers. But with Sibley, it seemed much more personal than she was letting on.

"But it's just Divination," Ron countered, stowing a few rolls in a cloth kerchief. "You can afford to miss it. Honestly." Hermione wasn't pleased with him urging Ella to forgo lessons, even if it was Divination.

"You're sure you're all right to go, then?" Kaltag concernedly asked his former Ball rendezvous. The witch nodded gracefully, taking a small biscuit to consume. The Being of Elements nervously straightened his checkered navy and light blue tie, clearing his throat anxiously. "I could, er...w-walk you to class...if—if you want to, that is..." The young Celestial's cheeks were blushing fairly, and the green-orbed seeker could tell he was doing his best to ignore the mocking of his siblings beside him. Hermione interestedly elevated an eyebrow to stare between the two, while Ella munched serenely on her biscuit. Swallowing slowly, Ella faced the young man with a calm grin, but shook her head.

"Thank you, but I'm fine, thanks. I've got to run back to the dormitory for my books." She explained. Dejectedly, Kaltag shook his head in understanding before facing his bare plate with a heated face. With that, Ella bade them goodbye and hastily left the Great Hall.

Harry looked at the stack of soggy potatoes on his platter and pensively thought over how they could slip into the classified sector of the library without garnering suspicion or getting caught. Inwardly scoffing, the Boy-Who-Lived exhaled sharply. Why couldn't he have had beneficial abilities such as that? It wasn't like he could command books to suddenly leap off their shelves and assault Voldemort; but the ability would be welcomed. Thinking back over all the weird feelings he was experiencing, Harry faced the crestfallen Celestial.

Clutching his bag to his shoulder, Harry swung his legs from behind the bench. "Kaltag? I need a word with you about..." his eyes found the concerned ones of his best friends, eyeing him rather worriedly. Kaltag quirked his head to the side in wait for an answer. "Seeker skills." This was obviously the correct choice of words, as Hermione huffed and seized a bowl of mixed fruit and Ron lowered himself in

his bench, engaging the nearby Neville and Icarus in conversation. Furrowing his brows, the fellow seeker agreed, shaking his head somewhat suspiciously.

"We'll wait for you two in the entrance hall." He informed his brother and Ron. The duo quickly ambled down the aisles of the boisterous hall and slithered through a cluster of fourth years before finding a vacant niche nearby. The corridors still reeked of stale food, as Filch had done his best to clean up after the cracked poltergeist. As Harry looked around to make sure no one was within hearing range, his eyes seriously landed on the prefect.

"I wanted to ask you about...you know. My...abilities." He began in silence, speaking only so Kaltag could hear him. The round, blue topaz eyes of the Being across from him hardened in business.

"Something wrong?" The dark-haired student frowned deeply, creasing his face in bafflement.

"I'm not sure." He disclosed, shifting uncomfortably. "I don't know. I don't know if this is normal, or if I'm slowly forming into something of a freak."

"Well, what is it?" The Celestial leaned against the somewhat gamy and gawkily shaped statue of Odafin the Odiferous.

"I don't want to rule out insanity just yet either," he genuinely added, uncomfortable with the thought that he might actually be going bonkers, "or Voldemort's meddling."

The Being narrowed his eyes considerably. "But...?"

With a gloomy sigh, the young wizard gave his friend a woeful look. "This morning in McGonagall's class, I think I read my slug's emotions. Not only mine, but the others and the crabs as well." The Being motioned for him to go on after a short pause. "And in hybrid class, I could sense Fang's emotions, and the Runespoor's." Clamoring of footsteps and loud voices let both young men know they had few seconds to come to a conclusion. Harry fidgeted in worry, while the person who could solve his quagmire nodded with an untraceable grin.

"Oh, that's normal." Harry felt a weight lift off him greatly. At least it was normal, despite his lack thereof. The redhead took on a sort of pained expression, facing his housemate like an older brother or as a father would when instructing his son. "You see, Harry, you are an earth elemental. You deal with forest and...well, earth. You are connected with earth and all its forms, including..."

"Woodland creatures." He whispered in nervous astonishment.

"Right." The Celestial prefect smiled. "In essence, you're practically Mother Nature. Without the 'mother' part." Both boys smirked at the comment, leaving the safety of the recess to meet their friends. "You will be communicating with everything, from slugs, to crabs, to all magical creatures dealing with your element. It'll be mental, but you'll deal." Breaking through a thicket of vicious Slytherin fifth years, the boys moved shoulder to shoulder against the onslaught of sated students.

"So, do you hear them?" he asked the Smythe heir over the noise.

"Occasionally." He replied, greeting a Brittlebore with a friendly pat. "I block them out often. Sometimes, they're just so strong, you have no choice but to read their sentiments." Reaching the safety of a nearby wall, the two leaned on it to wait for Ron and Starbuck. Harry's green eyes swung inquiringly in Kaltag's direction.

"Even pain?" The blue-cloaked student's eyes took on a troubled glint as he wrung his hands before him.

"Especially pain." The two didn't talk again as Ron and Starbuck exited along with a handful of second year Ravenclaws, and made their way to the North Tower in silence.

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Dean cursed under his breath as his finger grazed a broken shard of porcelain from the once handsome set of blue floral-printed teacups. Neville apologized for what Harry presumed was the thirteenth time in the last four minutes, as the handful of Parador boys worked to clean up the mess of broken pottery riddling the Divination floor. Today's lesson was interesting: Sibley had them practice Capnomancy, or divination by smoke (in this case, smoke from steaming cups of English Tea and the smoke of crystal balls).

Professor Sibley had stated it was simply for leisure, and not truly taken literally in the world of foresight.

If anything, Harry thought this made Trelawney loathe the more experienced instructor even more. The lesson was interrupted quite a few times due to their inane backbiting, and even the additional professors present descended the silver staircase grumbling. Even when Neville tripped onto the ground, taking with him the tablecloth, teapot, and the five ceramic cups and saucers on it, the two hadn't even cringed during their heated discussion. The hazy smoke riddled with odd glowing lights from the orbs had yet to fully clear, but Harry could still see the wrangling forms of his instructors. Their voices may have been exceptionally low, but the tension of the power struggle tussled about the room. While sweeping up shards with a nearby brush and dustpan, Harry could hear the two women arguing.

"...now, Sybil, let's not be rash..."

"It is Professor Trelawney, Sibley, and I do not appreciate you plaguing my aura." Trelawney's mystic voice accused harshly. Above the slight clinking of destroyed porcelain, Harry heard what was unmistakably a flabbergasted scoff.

"Oh, come now, Sybil." He listened to Sibley's wizened and humored voice. "The tower is emptying of students. You can drop the theatrics, now."

"Oh!" the resident Hogwarts divination teacher exclaimed in a scandalized tone. Her avid faction, Parvati and Lavender, exclaimed right with her. "I do not claim the Sight as histrionics, professor! I, unlike you, do not take them loosely." Neville apologized to Ron for slicing his palm on a particularly large piece of the teapot. Harry pulled off his spectacles to wipe the steam off of them; balancing them low on his nose, he inched ever closer to the conversation, brushing up the tiny splinters of ceramics.

"Mental, those two." Ron murmured to the other boys amidst wrapping his palm in a nearby scarf. Harry moved closer still behind the cover of a table; the smoke was starting to wane through the partly open transom, and he could see Lavender and Parvati standing impetuously ten or so feet from the women, clutching their textbooks close to their chests. A silver blur flew past the window as

Harry, licking the sweat from his lower lip, trained his audible range on the women.

"...ever said I took the Sight as a mockery?" Sibley amended, her tone upset and annoyed.

"You deride me before my students," Trelawney indicted, her large, bug-like orbs exaggerated behind her spectacles. "In my sanctuary—now desecrated by your unsighted ambience, and you have weakened my aura. I see the Sight of demise around you, Skeptic." The clanking of her counterfeit trinkets and footfalls could be heard as she strode away from her colleague.

"Skeptic?" the other repeated, openly displeased with the designation. "I've had more meaningful visions than you've had true ones," she hissed crossly, trailing the angered Seer. "If anyone is a farce to the Sight, 'tis you, Sightless Sybil Trelawney!" Lavender and Parvati both gasped in an appalled manner, glaring at the guest and sympathetic to their beloved instructor. By now, the only ones present in the class were a handful of Paradors—those cleaning up, Lavender and Parvati, and a wan Ella Burton slumped on the back table, staring eerily into the orb—and Ravenaires packing swiftly to abandon the dispute. Harry continued to unknowingly sweep the same powdered spot with his brush, his eyes fixed on the professors. The clanking of shoes descending the metal stairway alerted Harry to a flock of Ravenclaws hurriedly escaping. Terry Boot was frantically trying to shove his books into his satchel.

"Harry!" The Gryffindor was startled: he attempted to stand up, in the process, thumping his head on the table with a loud thud. Dropping the brush, Harry rubbed the back of his head with his warm hand, feeling the pain aching somewhat into a sore underneath his tangled tresses. A contrite whimper could be heard from Neville behind the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry perceived the sound of ceramic fragments nervously clinking together. Standing to his full height, the Gryffindor massaged the back of his head, lifting the full dustpan with him. He viewed the worse for the wear collection of Paradors behind him, including a nervous Neville at the forefront with a shattered cup and an intact saucer. "I-I'm so sorry, Harry, I—" Stroking the dully painful spot, Harry shrugged, smiling to ease his friend's apprehension.

"My fault." He grimaced, dumping the shards into a wooden wastebasket. Most of the six boys had scrapes and cuts on their hands and arms; Dean was busily wrapping his now nicked arm into the sleeve of his robe when he headed for the staircase and disappeared. Ron's palm had stopped bleeding after the placement of the second scarf; Starbuck, Icarus, and Kaltag were fussing over their spoiled fingers. And with Harry nursing a sensitive head bruise, the only one without blemish was—unexpectedly—Neville Longbottom. Retrieving their sacks and stowing away the last of the books, the boys rolled their eyes at the rising voices of their respective professors, with Lavender and Parvati silently egging on Trelawney. Icarus and Voltaires Jason Quon and Isabella Lancaster exited after Dean, eyeing Ella concernedly.

"Th-thanks for helping me clean up, everyone." Neville stammered, keeping a firm hold on the saucer in hand. "I messed up again. I'm so clumsy."

"It gets the best of us, Neville." Ron remarked, patting him courteously on the back; Neville jumped at the contact and spilled the shards on the floor again. Moving to stand beside Harry, Ron leaned surreptitiously over the seeker's shoulder and whispered, "Or some more than others." The arguing instructors continued on who was truly blessed with the Second Sight, gesturing wildly with their hands, making the clanging of spurious ornaments the main grating noise in the wide tower. The gossiping pair near them looked like they were itching to defend their professor.

"Unbelievable, those two." Terry Boot spat out, still forcing his textbook into his overstuffed bag. "Even they should know Divination and prophecies and predictions aren't real." He educated in a scholarly tone. Harry tended to silently disagree; due to the prophecy looming over his head and the firsthand account he'd seen back in his third year, he had an advantage in knowing it was authentic.

"I wouldn't say that, Boot." He slyly remarked, slinging his bag over his shoulder. Ron gave him a hard look before realizing what Harry was getting at.

"Yeah," chimed in Neville boldly with a silly smile. "There's a whole department at the Ministry dedicated to—"

"Are you done with those cups yet, Neville?" Harry loudly interrupted, changing the subject with a strict voice. Just how many people did Neville tell about earlier June? And if Neville was speaking, was Luna? Was Ginny? Or Ron or Hermione, even? The round-faced boy appeared mildly confused or hurt (Harry wasn't keen on caring about which) and returned to tossing the damaged pieces away. The Celestials simply gave Harry an odd look before regarding their own housemate in the back, staring notably into the radiant globe amidst the arguments.

The late arrival stared unblinkingly into the crystal sphere, somewhat entranced by its swirling smoke. The glow lit her eyes in a strange light, as if highlighting something significant and instructive. Harry frowned at his housemate, looking to the other boys.

"She doesn't look too well, I think," Starbuck deduced, fixing a wavy blonde lock of hair. "She shouldn't have come to class." Kaltag awkwardly concurred, wrinkling his eyebrows.

"Right then, we should get her out of here before those two blow up." Ron suggested, regarding the witch in concern. Nodding, the other boys fixed the bags upon their shoulders, leaving Neville to finish cleaning up.

They had only taken two steps toward their destination before they heard dead silence, followed by shaken gasps.

Harry and company whipped around quickly, only to gape in a mixture of horror and shock. For Harry, he had seen this firsthand before. But with two of them...that was a first.

Little by little, Parvati and Lavender backed away from what they had considered their hopeful ambition, succeeding that of gossiping. The room was quite still as all eyes landed on the rigid form of Professor Theola Sibley, with her eyes rolled back in her head and her body convulsing only slightly. The thick, plum cloak she wore stood out like white on black, as her skin was colorless. Beside Harry, the Paradors were shocked still with trepidation, their eyes wide in their sockets and entire beings firm. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Ron paling in great contrast to his red hair: he bore an uncanny resemblance to the sickly Ella. Neville was so edgy, his shaking hands rattled the small plate and teacup ruins as if they were a tinny bell.

Trelawney's hand was on her heaving chest, as she stared at her colleague in alarm. Harry vaguely wondered if she herself had ever seen a prediction being made, because her movement sealed his suspicion that she either hadn't or she was shocked her allegations were wrong. But Trelawney did not have time to register the fact her associate was indeed a true Seer. Sibley uncannily extended a long bony finger at Trelawney (the students drew back, frightful of what may happen), bent somewhat at the joint and spoke in a deep, resonating tone.

"SPEAK!" she commanded the baffled Trelawney, her large, insect-like eyes broad behind her magnifying glasses. Shaking her head ever so slowly, Trelawney's mouth hung in mystification, attempting to make sense of her command. Neville's grip was faltering; the jangling became louder and more anxious. Terry Boot had backed all the way toward the exit now; Parvati and Lavender were frozen a mere fifteen feet from the Seers. Harry could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Was this yet another prophecy? Were they about to reveal the secret he had long since kept from his best friends? Did he have to explain it now?

But his queries were thrown out the tower window as a chilly breeze swept all around them, fluttering their fringes and unsettling the scarves over Trelawney's lamps. This certainly never happened in the other prediction. And before he could determine if the breeze was ill omened or not, Hogwarts' resident Divination professor inhaled sharply, as if a jolt of Muggle electricity had passed through her body. The discordant voice, with which Harry had only heard twice before, suddenly filled the room in a rasping racket. Ron exhaled in panic, whilst the other Paradors remained immobile.

"Oracle..." her gruff tone ordered. Unexpectedly, she turned from Sibley's rigid, her bony finger to facing their disinclined audience. Harry felt Neville brush by him, seeking protection behind the Boy-Who-Lived; the girls appeared to have uneasily considered their favorite professor in a new light. "Oracle...Seer...speak!" She bellowed ruthlessly at the set of students. Neville and Ron winced, recoiling somewhat at her tone; Harry couldn't see the Celestial brothers and it seemed Boot had forgotten his objective to escape.

In the same motion as her rival, Trelawney raised her pointy, over bedecked red nail and index finger, this time, pointing at the small



group. Harry swallowed thickly, feeling his heart desperately pounding against his sternum. She was aiming at him. Ron grimaced once more. But wait...

She was also aiming at him.

Harry's countenance fell confused. She was pointing at Ron? Or him? Ron? A Seer? It was as ridiculous as claiming Harry Potter a Seer.

"ORACLE!" she demanded once more with her abrasive tone. The icy wind started up once more, unsettling every individual in the room with a wince; even Harry had to vocally protest his comfort. Only one person remained silent the entire time.

The person Trelawney was pointing to.

Not Ron.

And certainly not Harry.

"SEER!" she decreed. "SPEAK! MAKE KNOWN THINE MESSAGE OF PURPOSE!"

It was then Harry gulped, blinking rapidly at the squally cold nipping at his emerald eyes. Hesitant to do so, but not resisting, Harry followed the accusing finger, tracing an invisible straight path. It wasn't him; and it wasn't Ron, as their eyes had briefly met when, he, too, decided to track the direction. All eyes marked the cursed path between the two sixth years. And baffled eyes beheld the frightful sight, precisely behind the best friends. The eyes of the so-called Oracle glowing ever white, and their skin in no competition with the hue of a cloud.

Shock registered again throughout the tower. The only ones seemingly unfazed were that of the three Seers themselves. Professors Theola Sibley and Sybil Trelawney, the experienced of the three. And Harry batted his eyelids once more at the unforeseen third.

None other than the mysterious Ella Burton.

A/N: Revised chapter. Tweaked it. Just an ickle bit.

## Chapter Seventeen: The Chosen Prophecy

Harry exhaled sharply; his emerald eyes were broad and his mouth gaped in alarmed incredulity. The sight of the inflexible, ashen Ella Burton with her ordinarily russet eyes now opaque was seemingly more frightening than the times he'd seen Trelawney on the verge of envisaging. Her hard eyes were oddly determined and though she made no movement, Harry could see the warring behind the chalky orbs. Ron was stiff, staring at the strange spectacle, his face plastered with panic. Trelawney continued to chant in a low tone while her wavering, adorned finger was still aimed at the whitish figure, staring down accusingly at the crystal ball. Ella's scratchy breathing filled the room, as if trying to suck the air out of the tepid area. The Gryffindor witch's alabaster eyes were wide, piercing the swirling, cloudy sphere before her, alighting her face in an ethereal glow.

"The dormant one...Erestor Oronrá...has awoken..." she rasped, her head swaying slightly at her tuneless song. "The dormant one...Erestor Oronrá...will rise..." There was a clamor coming from Parvati and Lavender's side of the room, in which Harry heard chairs scrape against the floor and quills scratching noisily on parchment. Ella's face became paler as she swung somewhat on her pouf, her chilling eyes never leaving the bright, churning clouds within the crystal globe. "The dormant one...is coming...."

"Dormant for millennia...awoken on All Hallows Eve..."

The witch issued a shuddering breath; as if a particular Patronus-phobic existence had swept through the area, Harry suddenly felt a wintry breeze pervade the tower, assaulting his lungs.

"Reared at the death of the virtuous seventh...the Blesséd Child Phoenix will

Rouse as the sixth month under Mars expires, mightier than their foes.

Eyes of Silver...Eyes of Gold...Eyes of White...and Eyes of Old.

The Child Of Phoenix will merge with their unknown kin, beneath the

Undulating placard of war; both guardians of those meek, those mild...

Talma à Coia's Golradir Celebrindal is the Blesséd Child Phoenix....

The dormant one..."

Ella's unblinking eyes abandoned the ominous ball and stared unswervingly toward the Paradors and single Ravenclaw. Neville quivered at the unsettling attention toward their side, rattling the shattered cup and saucer in his already trembling hands. Harry inhaled intensely, finding it rather difficult to breathe. Slowly her eyes swept over every person in the room, holding their gazes in uncontrolled intimidation. Beside him, Ron released a grimace, before Ella's wraithlike eyes moved on. The black-haired wizard's breath caught in his throat as her unstable eyes sharply settled on him, lingering for a while. The seeker discharged a shivering mouthful of air as she continued to stare down every other student and professor. The foretelling witch parted her lips ominously, outing a rattling breath similar to that of a Dementor. Her right hand, quavering from unrestrained control, flattened directly over her own pulsating core beneath her chest.

"...resides here...."

Ella's chest expanded as though it was close to bursting, taking in an intense breath. She blinked several times, reverting the milky whites back to calm browns.

No one dared to move as she lowered her brows, looking every bit confused as Trelawney appeared after a forecast. The professors behind them shuddered, finally released from whatever held them. The scratching of Parvati and Lavender's quills rang throughout the tomblike room loudly, disconcerting the students.

"My goodness," Trelawney sighed breathlessly, her beaded necklace clinking on her heaving chest. "I do not believe it." No one but Harry paid attention to her words, as all eyes scrutinized Ella in silence. "The time is far spent." The pupils broke their examinations of their fellow sixth year to throw their professor a baffled look. Harry figured they must not have known some Seers do not remember that they have endured a vision, especially when another witnesses it. Sibley appeared unaware of her surroundings while Trelawney

lowered her thick brows at the group. "What has happened here?" She gestured to the broken china. "And what are you all still doing here?"

Several turned to throw Ella another bewildered glance only to find her vacant chair. Lavender and Parvati expressed their surprise, but smartly hadn't said a word. Ron and the others seemed too shocked by the prophecy and the newly ordained Oracle's disappearance to speak. Terry Boot's spot was empty; Harry figured he must have bailed shortly after the escaping sixth year. Sibley also joined in the interrogation, angling her head gravely.

"I'm sure none of you would like to be tardy to your next classes." Her tone was one of threat, deceiving all in the stiff room but the Boy-Who-Lived. Gossip queens Parvati and Lavender quickly stuffed the parchment in their sacks as the pallid Sibley crossed her arms portentously.

"We...were, uh," Harry's dry mouth worked to produce an answer, any answer. "Uh...were, er...." Sibley's raised, cynical eyebrow held her face in a skeptical expression.

"Mr. Potter?" Harry wished Ron or any one would be able to pick up the slack for him. What was he going to say, oh, we just witnessed a petrifying Tri-Seer prophecy with you, the old bat, and a sixth year witch about a topic I've been looking for? Can you repeat the last line; I don't think I heard it too well?

"...um, we were...helping," his eyes suddenly slid to his quaking round friend. "Neville. Yes, we were cleaning the area as best we could. Sorry about that. We'll—we'll just be going, then...." Neville quickly tossed his dustpan of debris away, slinging his bag frantically over his shoulder. The girls stood swiftly, inching their way toward their housemates; Harry practically had to push Ron toward the staircase, feeling the ever-penetrating stare of Professor Sibley piercing his back.

The students hastily clunked down the silvery staircase and practically flew down the dizzying spiral stairwell, rushing past an ominously bantering portrait of monks. Ron and Neville led the way into the somewhat languorous corridor, their chests slightly heaving from the run. Lavender and Parvati fussed silently over their

windswept hairstyles, while the boys led the way in an awkwardly tense silence.

Harry could only guess what was racing through his housemates' minds. The girls, though outwardly unfazed, moved jerkily as they tucked their hair and swapped inexperienced smirks; Kaltag and Starbuck were broad-eyed and pale, bringing up the rear with slight sheens of sweat on their faces. Neville kept swallowing and coiling his robes in his hands; his globular face was pasty, and his dark eyes seemed far-flung, as if he had left its brilliance in the Divination tower. Only Ron seemed more natural than the others, with his ashen features and furrowed brows; disparate to the other Paradors, his mind seemed to be at work, rather than chronicling the shock of what they witnessed. As the seven rounded a sharp passageway to Gryffindor Tower, sputtering from Neville put everyone on alert once more. There was already one housemate who was a suspected Seer: they weren't to be caught off guard with a prospective other.

But Harry had nothing to be concerned with: Neville was only too nervous to put his reflection into words. "Th-th-th-th..." he blubbered, his mouth and chin vibrating in fright at the fresh memory. "It—that—that—" The girls scoffed in revolt, scrunching their faces at the forgetful Gryffindor.

"That...was..." Ron blurted out, voicing his thoughts, as well as the other Paradors. "Creepy." The absentminded sixth year sighed in relief, nodding nervously at Ron. Harry remained silent, as not to reveal to anyone that all prophecies were daunting, be it the first, second, or tenth time around. Ascending a sandstone flight of stairs, the witches huffed in disagreement. "Was that—?"

"A prediction, yes." Harry simply confirmed, clutching his knapsack closer. Ron visibly shuddered, curling his lips back in ill feeling.

"Bloody frightening."

"I beg your pardon," Parvati stomped heatedly past Harry and knocked Neville's shoulder out of the way to fall in step with the Gryffindor prefect. "That was the most thrilling—"

"—Most spectacular—" Lavender chimed in abstractedly.

"—Privilege we've ever been granted." Padma's twin haughtily defended. Ron took a step back from her intensity, throwing Harry a disturbed glance. Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses, not in the mood to pry the witches off of Ron. The Indian (1) witch sighed superiorly, shaking her head in awe. "To see an actual prophecy. They're only few and far between every half decade or so."

"Only few true predictions have been reported every year. Prophecies tend to make rare appearances." Lavender enlightened, gripping her burlap sack close, her high-pitched squealing unnerving a nearby group of Hufflepuff third years. "Do you know what this means, Parvati?" Ron fell back to walk beside Harry and Neville through a lengthy, sparsely filled walkway as Lavender took her place beside her best friend. Both had equally ecstatic smiles sliced into their faces. "We get to discover the true meaning behind it! Just like Professor Trelawney taught us in afternoon divining gatherings!" Harry exchanged incredulous looks with his best friend, rubbing the outline of his raised scar worryingly.

"Yes," Parvati's low voice breathed before them. "We can unearth the true meaning behind the prophecy! And we'll get Ella to help us!"

"Ah!" a noise of dissent broke their rambling to direct the wizards and witches' awareness to one of the frowning Beings behind them. "You'll do no such thing." Kaltag chided, furrowing his brows. The seeker lifted a raven eyebrow at the blue-eyed prefect, chafing the abrasive fabric of his bag betwixt his calloused fingers.

"She's already been through enough, mind you." Ron took over, facing the perturbed young women with disbelief. To assume the Gryffindor gossipers would stoop as low was reprehensible; to hear it first hand was inconceivable. Frowning, Harry stretched his arms across his black-cloak obscured chest.

"But she's a Seer." Lavender informed the obvious, directing them one corridor away from Gryffindor Tower. Harry narrowed his eyes at the shallow housemates he'd come to tolerate the past six years.

"Ella may, or may not be a Seer, but I'll tell you one thing," Kaltag spoke, with true threat in his tone. "She won't become a pawn in your Divination games. She's to be left alone." The two females abruptly ceased their stride, glaring at the Celestial with gawking

expressions. The green-eyed Gryffindor searched over the heads of his passing house members for Hermione anywhere in the mix.

"Who are you to tell us what we can and cannot do?"

"We're only looking out for her best interests." Ron spoke calmly, his reddening ears betraying his true stance toward the painstaking witches.

"And who are you?" Parvati bitingly retorted, her arms crossing her defiant chest. "Her big brother?" Ron's cheeks colored portentously, matching his crimson locks. Harry felt Neville quivering between himself and Starbuck as Ron balled his fists at his sides.

"Come off it, girls." Starbuck mediated admonishingly. "She's our housemate. A Gryffindor. We're not going to manipulate her because of what happened." Harry tended to agree, nodding immensely.

"For all you know, she isn't a Seer. Maybe she was..." he rolled his emerald eyes to the vaulted ceiling, searching for an answer in the silver cobwebs above. "Dunno, a medium, rather?" The skeptical countenances on the young witches were contemptible, but rather than anger two incensed, ginger-haired prefects, they halfheartedly agreed. Clammy Neville exhaled a deep breath, wiping his wet forehead on his ceramic-powdered sleeve. But Parvati and Lavender weren't succumbing with their compliancy yet. The bronze-skinned witch brandished a firm finger at the boys, her dark eyes swirling with intimidation.

"Say nothing until Lavender and I have figured this out." Her partner silently backed her, traversing her limbs threateningly and lowering her brows. She rounded on Neville, poking him in the shoulder repeatedly. The plump wizard grimaced at the contact, rubbing his assaulted shoulder. "Nothing, Neville." Harry wrinkled his brows at the dogged duo, flexing his fingers in tension.

"I expect you'll have to give Boot the same warning," hoarse Ron belted out roughly. "Give him a heads up since the bloke tore out of the class so quickly. I'm surprised he didn't leave his knickers behind."

There was an audible gasp of realization as the boys commenced to the tower, leaving the females behind. "Perhaps he is Arrested Orion." Harry heard Lavender speak; four bewildered pairs of eyes met one another's, leaving Neville to helplessly ponder what he wasn't privy to. An amused grin broke through impassive Harry's stoic appearance, which he shared with his evenly humored best friend.

"Arrested Orion?" he bit back a laugh. The pair didn't seem to notice his buoyant tone or the stifling laughter as they retraced their steps back out of the corridor.

As the girls turned the corner, Harry distinctly heard Lavender say, "Maybe he's Arrested Orion, the blessed child. He fled pretty quickly, didn't he?" The quintet of sixth years filled the time after the witches' disappearance with an awkward, nervous silence. The black-haired teenager knew for a fact, despite the lighthearted situations that had occurred in the last few minutes, none could erase the memory of the new prophecy.

Upon approaching the Fat Lady in the portrait, fussily primping her curls in an antiquated silver compact, Ron decided to sever the stillness. "Carpe occasus." He recited the password. Quietly, the four climbed into the common room, taking in the inert vacancy of the area. Heavy footfalls from the stairwells alerted them to pupils in their dormitories. Only Neville made a move to ascend the rough steps.

"Any—anyone going?" The stout young wizard nervously inquired, his eyes darting helplessly for an answer. The four shook their heads somewhat distractedly, sinking into the plush armchairs offered before the wavering hearth. Longbottom's footsteps thinned out as he climbed higher into the tower, leaving his dorm mates to ponder in the common area.

Harry simply shook his head in a jumble of disbelief, surprise, anxiety and other feelings he could not sort out at the moment. Wide eyes replayed the prophecy over and over again behind their fretful orbs. "How did that happen?" Kaltag began, holding his head in his hands. "Sibley and Trelawney—somewhat understandably," he loosened his checkered tie around his neck with a tone of an erudite logician, "but a sixth year student? And Ella?" The Gryffindor's name



echoed in the empty room, leaving the young men to ponder over the situation once more.

"She wasn't feeling at all well today." Ron spoke, and Harry imagined, seriously trying to doubt what his eyes beheld. Crumpling his face as if he'd sampled one of Hagrid's rock cakes, the keeper distastefully added, "Perhaps these so-called mediums were preparing her, or got to her before class?"

"Yes, but why during our class?" Starbuck delved, creasing his brows. "Back in Transfiguration, she looked about ready to drop; and in Arithmancy, the professor gave her a slip to go to the Infirmary, but she refused." Harry worried his lip, frowning. Had she known something was going to happen with her?

"Does someone or something know what we're up to?" he questioned, sliding his arms across his chest. The students in the dormitories above thumped noisily on the ground; a door opened and loudly slammed seconds later. A familiar raven feline trotted down the steps, its amber eyes judging the teenagers before it nimbly leapt off its hocks to settle in an unfilled armchair by the fire.

Harry massaged the tense muscles in his neck, wincing at the rigidity. "Well, it mentioned the Child of Phoenix." Ron established, rolling a stray piece of thread between his fingers. He mirthlessly snorted, leaving the others to read his stern russet eyes. "And what's worse, Queen Loose Lips and her Apprentice now know."

"And Boot."

"You think they'll tell others?"

"They'd better not." Ron replied, glaring at the fire. "It's none of their business."

"And it's none of ours, Ron." Harry reminded, sulking at the admittance. "We only stumbled upon it in accident."

The flame-haired prefect grunted, wrinkling the hem of his robes. "Call it what you will, but I think there's a reason something wanted us to hear the prophecy first hand. I mean, it'll take me a while to grasp Trelawney's an actual Seer..."

"She ordered Ella to speak in a disturbing voice, that doesn't necessarily make her an Oracle." Starbuck retorted, glowering at the vigilant feline.

"What more proof do you need? A conniption?" Ron suggested crossly. Starbuck huffed disagreeably, narrowing his chocolate eyes.

"You were always the one to condemn Trelawney's abilities; now you're a full-fledged believer?" Harry observed the exchange between the two, nervously eyeing Kaltag. He did not wish for anyone to argue to the point of a split friendship; he had experienced it all too well in the last weeks.

If flames could flare out of Ron's nostrils, they would have. But for now, the dithering fire gained strength and the flames were now licking the blackened gate and mantle. "Oh, I still think she's a bat. But I'm open to the possibility that she can get visions, too."

The boys expelled air in a fleeting chuckle. But only Harry could still sense the uneasiness in the air. Not only did they receive a substantial sign (at the expense of their friend), but also more on this professed existence. Shaking his head silently, he realized he still hadn't informed his friends of the prophecy from June. It was all on him to let them know, and all on him to fulfill it. The burdens finally weighed invisibly on his shoulders as he pinched the bridge of his nose. The Prophecy. He had his work cut out for him on the first one.

And Harry inwardly pleaded miserably that he had nothing to do with this new one.

ooooo

Ella was not seen in the rest of Monday's classes. She did appear at the following days' lectures, but she was usually the last to enter and the first to leave. The witch continually sat in the back of the classrooms, avoiding eye contact from everyone. Harry and Ron resorted to keeping an eye on her dorm mates, who hungrily eyed her for information.

Terry Boot appeared as he always had, reserved and nonchalant, though Harry could tell he was nervous. Neville seemed to get back to normal: though at any mention of predictions, Divination or Trelawney, he flinched as if he heard the dark lord's name.

Hermione, Harry glanced her way, seemed troubled when they told her what happened that afternoon. None forgot the high ridicule in which she held Trelawney, and learning the woman had actually presaged seemed to deliver a slap in the knowledgeable witch's face. She made an extra effort to soothe Ella's nerves without alerting her to anything, but the mysterious witch shut everyone out. It was back to the library during the evenings for the six friends, much to Ron's dismay.

Pigwidgeon twittered madly around Ron's head, missing several irked swats from the prefect's hand. The owl whizzed through the air over Harry's head, hooting excitedly to finally deliver a letter after being inactive (an alarming feat for the Colin Creevey of Owls) for months. Swiping at the bird again, it was finally Ginny who gently plucked the tiny messenger from the air and handed Ron the small scroll. "From mum."

Ron immediately unrolled the parchment, letting his eyes race over the words. "Oh, she's pleased we haven't gotten into anything so far." He notified with deviation. Harry spooned some sugar onto his breakfast cereal while the prefect continued. "And she wants to know if we're coming home for Yule holidays, and if we're inviting anyone. As always, Harry, you're welcome."

"It's a bit early to be on about Yule, don't you think?" listening Hermione questioned, mixing the cinnamon in her oatmeal. The Weasleys shrugged, and Ron stuffed the notice in his robe pocket. A furry white blur landed before Harry, and a familiar streak of silver sped over the table to land in front of Kaltag. Hedwig nipped a bit harder than usual on his finger, her large amber eyes accusing.

"So I haven't given you anything to deliver in a while. Give me a break." He growled in irritation. The snowy owl only ruffled her feathers and leveled her head in answer. Nipping a strip of bacon from the platter, he offered it to his irate owl in a contribution of peace. Hedwig didn't budge, simply narrowing her sharp eyes. "Oh, come on," he crossly waved before her beak. "I haven't poisoned it, you know." It was then she tousled her immaculate down once more and Harry deciphered her emotions.

Hedwig was hurt. Not only because he hadn't given her something to convey, but because he hadn't even visited her. She didn't want to be won over with bacon: she wanted an apology.

Lowering his brows in guilt under his familiar's scrutiny, Harry's sincere green eyes met the snappish Hedwig's orbs. "I'm sorry I haven't visited you, girl." He tentatively reached out a finger to stroke her luxurious feathered chest. She flattened her head once more and followed the path of his long fingers carefully. Her ocher eyes snapped back to Harry angrily as if to urge, "Go on."

"I've been a jerk to you lately...and others, too." Hedwig did not want to be compared with others. She clipped her beak wrathfully; her pointed talons crushed the parchment in resentment. "I'll buy you two bags of owl treats in Hogsmeade next month." Her head twitched slightly, as if to express, "Not buying it, five-fingered freak." She nipped painfully at his fingers. Harry drew back, rubbing the stinging mark. A light giggle was heard from the youngest Weasley.

"Owl trouble, Harry?" she clutched Pig in her fist, rubbing his tiny head to pacify him. Hedwig glared at Harry, daring him to deride her. The boy withdrew from commenting, instead focusing his abilities to crack his pet.

"I'll visit you twice a week then, and more if I have a letter." It was his final offer. Harry didn't quite feel up to falling shamefully to his knees and clasping his hands before him, imploring his irked owl to exonerate him. The bird hooted in consent, raising her head from its lowered stance. She priggishly accepted the forgotten bacon in his hands and released the captive notice, flying off in the direction of the large windows.

Harry unfolded the letter and read the usual short notice from Sirius, highlighting he was on a long assignment and may not be able to make it back for Christmas. Resealing the letter, the Gryffindor shrugged noncommittally, and shoved it in his school bag. It bothered him to think Sirius was always away. He had come so close to losing him: the emerald-eyed student could not bear to think what the holidays would be without him since he knew of his innocence.

"You're right, Hermione." The bushy-haired witch held his gaze in befuddlement before Harry swirled his soggy cereal. "It's entirely too early to think about Christmas."

ooooo

Harry narrowed his eyes at the Bell-Curved Sentiment sitting on the weathered table. It mocked him with its serene cobalt blush, ridiculing his absorbed concentration. He balled his hands into fists, glaring at the flower, slowly deepening into a shade of crimson. Closing his eyes in frustration, he exhaled sharply.

"You're doing it again." The Being sitting on the nearby table scolded. "At least you're skilled in making it turn crimson all the time."

"Yeah, well I don't see you helping." Harry huffily accused, rubbing his tingling scar. Kaltag simply looked at his year mate with an expressionless face. Harry hated when he couldn't center his abilities, even if only to make the buds on the magical plant bloom. The redhead turned his head to face away from the irate Gryffindor, and Harry followed his gaze to the two-blossomed plant. The Being only raised an eyebrow over his glimmering green eyes at the claret plant, and two buds opened in full bloom. Irritation coursed through Harry at the Celestial's display.

"And if I did help you, I'd be showing off." He simply stated, crossing his arms smugly over his satin cloak. The spectacled teenager lowered his heavy head, staring at the dirt-tracked ground of Greenhouse Four. They had been at it for an hour, and he hadn't so much as made the plant twitch. Kaltag was, as always, correct. He didn't want to show off in front of the newly ordained Elemental, even if it was in the form of teaching. "I don't know why you're thinking so hard into this. Just calm down and don't put so much thought into making one bloom. Do it with indifference, as if you don't care how many blooms will surface." He instructed expertly.

"Do you realize how hard this is?" the icy wind outside the greenhouse howled, escaping into the conservatory by way of the broken casements on the roof. The Paraffin lifted a brow, unfurling his arms to point to the rustling leaves on the Snapdragon above them.

"Wasn't that hard now, was it, Mother Nature?" he teased, smirking at the incensed Gryffindor. "What, do I need some Machiavellian technique to get you to make a plant grow now?" Harry chortled without feeling, glowering at the boy before him.

They had been practicing for a few weeks; he had been better the last time. But that was before the new prophecy unraveled and he fretted over his own. Not quite ready to free the liberation of anger within him, Harry propped himself on the craggy bench of rustling Mandrakes behind him. "I'll bet Hermione and Ron would be loads better than you." He grumbled, pressing hard into the raised disfigurement.

"Yeah, I'll bet," the Being returned equally annoyed. "But Hermione and Ron aren't Elementals, are they?"

Harry knew he was being difficult, but he wasn't up to playing the part of acquiescence just yet. He had yet to include his friends on his new ability: doing so would force him to divulge the prophecy. "Besides," Kaltag continued. "From what you've told me, you haven't told them yet. What part of 'you can tell them' do you not comprehend?"

"The 'you can tell them part.'" He grunted, scuffing his trainers in a mound of dry sand. Raising his head to stare down the Celestial with his fierce bottle green eyes, Harry crinkled his eyebrows. "What's more, I'm sure there are others in this school who can aid me—not just you."

A dry chuckle escaped the blue-eyed prefect's throat. Crossing his arms once again, he swung his dangling legs from side to side. "Oh, yes, Isis' brothers, Aleron and Ulan Layland, whose favorite pastime is picking at scabs." Harry hid a grimace, but scowled at the boy one full year his senior. "No? Then how about Yorick's older sister, the firstborn graduate? Or Aiko Cheng, Entity of Moods?"

"All right..."

"I think dear Aunt Artemis is on her annual hunt right about now..."

"Okay!" The Paraffin Celestial paused, regarding Harry with a fractious countenance. Sighing in defeat, Harry lifted his heavy body from the table and faced the contemptuous Bell-Curved Sentiment.

His face was set in weariness and failure to even affect a bud on the shrubbery. Shaking his head at the now blue-hued blooms, the Gryffindor merely sighed and waved his hand passively at the flora with four blooms.

And now, eight azure blossoms adorned the Bell-Curved Sentiment.

"And he calls me a show-off." The Being murmured. "Good job." Harry grinned at the silly plant, resting again on the table behind him. There was only silence as he then observed Kaltag tending to a plant. His eyes glowed a healthy emerald as he urged the potted Snapdragon to bloom.

"How did you control your forces at first?" he asked, genuinely interested in how Kaltag came to be. The teenager halted in his tending of the pale purple blossoms to revert his eyes to normal and keep a steady gaze with his housemate. His eyebrows furrowed and he appeared to deeply consider how to best answer the inquiry.

"At first, they were linked to my emotions," he recited, moistening his lips in thought. "And it was hard to manage them. Back when I was twelve, we learned about our abilities from father." His eyes flickered ever so slightly at the word 'father' as if he hadn't recognized it. "And a week after the discovery, it was our first outing to Aristedes Square. And the first place we visited was my great-aunt Persephone's bookstore."

The wizard cocked his head somewhat to the side, reflecting over the information. "She was upset that day. Great-Uncle had visited her earlier." He continued, his voice much more distant than when he had begun. "And she was beyond fuming with his words. Father had told us her husband Hades had been there: all the flowers in front of her store were blackened and dead. Persephone was so angry," he went on in a stressed tone, "that she torched the store with everyone in it." At this, the Gryffindor's orbs broadened. He found it difficult to think a wizard or witch would be so livid as to set their own shop afire. "I panicked. And somehow my forces fused with my panic, and caused the fountain in front of her shop to explode, drenching the place and us."

Harry laughed at the scene playing out in his head as everyone exited a charred bookshop saturated with water. He wished his first

trip to Diagon Alley had been as unforgettable. "Must have been memorable." He commented.

"We had our books sent to us from then on." He joked with a smile, tracing a finger over the lilac Snapdragon bloom. But Harry realized the smile hadn't quite reached his eyes. "Same time next week, then." Harry thumped the Being genially on the back as he left, closing the door to Greenhouse Four with a faint click.

A grin spread slowly across his face as a weak breeze picked up, cooling his rose-tinged cheeks. As he sloped up the hill, he paused to admire a pathetic, nearly dead weed oscillating in the ocean of grass crossing the grounds. Bending lower to get a better view, Harry pushed his spectacles further upon the bridge of his nose and rubbed the velvety leaves between his fingers. He stood and grinned to approve of his work, and resumed sloping up the hill, with one brilliantly yellow wild flower swaying in a sea of green pasture within his mind.

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Harry flung the prophecy across the floor, Neville spun himself around on his back and scooped the ball to his chest. Malfoy pointed the wand instead at Neville, but Harry jabbed his own wand back over his shoulder and yelled, "Impedimenta!"

Malfoy was blasted off his back. As Harry scrambled up again he looked around and saw Malfoy smash into the dais on which Sirius and Bellatrix were now dueling. Malfoy aimed his wand at Harry and Neville again, but before he could draw breath to strike, Lupin had jumped between them.

"Harry, round up the others and GO!"

Harry seized Neville by the shoulder of his robes and lifted him bodily onto the first tier of stone steps. Neville's legs twitched and jerked and would not support his weight. Harry heaved again with all the strength he possessed and they climbed another step—

A spell hit the stone bench at Harry's heel. It crumbled away and he fell back to the step below: Neville sank to the ground, his legs still jerking and thrashing, and thrust the prophecy into his pocket.



o o o o o

Dumbledore sped down the steps past Neville and Harry, who had no more thought of leaving. Dumbledore was already at the foot of the steps when the Death Eaters nearest realized he was there. There were yells; one of the Death Eaters ran for it, scrabbling like a monkey up the stone steps opposite. Dumbledore's spell pulled him back as easily and effortlessly as through he had hooked him with an invisible line—

Only one couple were still battling, apparently unaware of the new arrival. Harry saw Sirius duck Bellatrix's jet of red light: He was laughing at her. "Come on, you can do better than that!" he yelled, his voice echoing around the cavernous room.

Bellatrix scrunched her face impetuously and aimed her wand with purpose. The laughter had not quite died from his face, but his eyes widened in alarm.

And in realization.

As the Death Eaters scrambled around them to escape the headmaster's wand, a slow, sinister smile settled in a sick, serene fashion across the skeletal woman's face. The roar of sound instantly shut off in Harry's ears: He could still feel Neville twitching beside him. Bellatrix never uttered a word as the jet of blood-tinged light sped toward her cousin. The fleeing Death Eaters surrounding them took off like cockroaches in sudden bright light as the red streak of light flashed in Harry's vision.

Not like this.

He couldn't lose his godfather.

Harry released Neville, though he was unaware of doing so. He was jumping down the steps again, pulling out his wand, as Dumbledore turned to the dais too.

Sirius' blue-gray eyes were wide with shock; yet, Harry could place an odd brevity in boldness behind them, as if he were ready to go. Bellatrix still held her wand in surety, grinning madly at her kinsman.

But Sirius tapered his eyes slightly, and in a quick movement stepped urgently to his right, effectively dodging certain harm. Unfortunately for the Death Eater frantic to escape the chamber at the time, their fellow Death Eater's curse them squarely in the chest.

Sirius, hunched over a foot or so away from the stunned adherent of the Dark Lord, fiercely watched as the dark figure took an age to fall. Their body curved in a graceful arc, and their mask slipped from their face, clattering noiselessly to the ground and in the muteness in Harry's ears. He had only caught a glimpse as the man sank backward through the ragged veil hanging from the arch....

Macnair.

And Harry spotted the look of mingled fear and surprise on the executioner's face as he spotted his own executioner, registered with absolute disregard and nonchalance. He fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a moment as through in a high wind and then fell back into place.

Dumbledore momentarily eyed the veil for whatever reason before he continued to invisibly deter Death Eaters. Sirius' triumphant laugh echoed throughout the hollow, followed by the rapid clicking of Lestrage's boots. "What's the matter, cousin?" he taunted, his voice rough as he straightened his stance. "Too coward like your dark lord to finish the job?" A flash of spells cut his celebratory comments short and the gaunt-faced wizard brandished his wand, intent on defending his only childhood friend against their oppressors.

But Harry wasn't observing any of this. He couldn't feel the slight kicks from Neville's wayward feet. He did not feel the cool rush of air the spells brought as they whizzed past the students' heads. It didn't matter that Neville had accidentally destroyed the prophecy both sides were frenziedly stopping at nothing to seek. His emerald eyes only followed the progress of the one getting away. The one who attempted to kill his godfather—the only person since the death of his parents he had considered something akin to a parent.

A boiling rage unlike any he had ever experienced made its way through him, and he gripped his wand tightly in his grasp. He was going to make Bellatrix Lestrage pay for almost destroying his godfather. The dueling figures on the floor were mere puffs of air in

his mind's eye: His real target was nearing the exit of the spacious room. Harry abruptly took off, dashing down the steps at an alarming speed. Neville's calls went unheard, and someone—he reckoned it was Lupin—was calling for him to stay put.

Dumbledore had most of the remaining Death Eaters grouped in the middle of the room, seemingly immobilized by invisible ropes. Mad-Eye Moody had crawled across the room to where Tonks lay and was attempting to revive her. Behind the dais there was a flash of light and a grunt—Kingsley had run forward and launched a spell at the fleeing Bellatrix, angered that his spell had affected the stone wall rather than the lethal female. Not one to miss out on a chance to harm someone, Lestrage threw her own hex back at the Auror with a loud bang. A yell from behind the dais ricocheted around the room; Harry saw Kingsley, yelling in pain, hit the ground.

Bellatrix continued to run as Dumbledore whipped around. He aimed a spell at her but she deflected it. She was halfway up the steps now—

"Almost...killed...nearly killed Sirius!" Harry's own words were muddled in his ears as his brain fired one objective: To kill Bellatrix Lestrage. "She almost destroyed Sirius!" My only chance at a future family, he furiously theorized. "I'LL KILL HER!"

And he was off, scrambling up the stone benches.

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Thin, wasted fingers drummed the pointed chin beneath them. Fusty air slithered into the serpentine nostrils as he breathed in, and exhaled with disgust. He knew it wouldn't be long. He wouldn't have to endure such offensive Muggle surroundings.

He turned his tightly stretched face toward the opening door and the faint jangle of armor, and allowed a smile to pull at his lips. Crimson eyes beheld Mystikos of Xenos, the ruler of the Blood Legion, and loather of all things good and pure. His breastplate was matted with aged spots, and his hair seemed more mangled than when they last met. The darkly painted man's cold eyes glimmered in the firelight.

If Voldemort had a true heart, it would have leapt in his breast. For he knew the man and his hunters along with the Death Eaters were to return if but for only one reason.

Voldemort leered in a way most unbecoming. "You've found them." Mystikos' dark eyes glittered with twisted glee as a smirk gradually stretched across his chapped lips.

"Runic carvings on the hilt and blade's edge, priceless yellow gems. Underground, we suspect. We have found one." He rectified. "But where one is..."

The Dark Lord sneered, as gaily as his wickedness would allow. "The other is sure to follow." They clasped hands in victory and bared their fangs in contentment. "We will strike true," his high, cold voice firmly stated. "And when the moon is at its crescent in her sky." The dark Celestial supported him with a guttural grunt. "And Dumbledore will fall in the caves where they lie." Throaty chuckles were shared between the associates.

"Brother," Anton began, squeezing his ally's hand. "I have only one request of you." As all wicked men would know, kindred spirits are one in the same: evil always has an impediment. But Voldemort, though he less often than never grants or allows favors, would grant this one so his kinsman desires. Furthermore, what is it His Majesty wishes that he himself cannot bestow?

"By my will, your majesty." He consented, studying the bronze-skinned man with his vermilion gaze. His armor clanked as he released the sorcerer's hand and stepped back. Mystikos' eyes held hope and deep affection, with borderline obsession. The dark wizard suddenly understood what the demand would enclose.

"The four precious topaz stones within the swift sword's hilt," he turned his back to the dark lord, facing the fire pensively. "Those jewels. Inestimable treasure." Tom Marvolo Riddle pursed his lipless mouth, lifting his heavily robed arms to fold. Though he couldn't see his alliance's face, he knew of what the request entailed. "I imagine they would adorn my beloved most deferentially, in a golden aura of splendor untold. Would it trouble you to give them to me while your task is ended, swift and true?"

The dark man hadn't enough information to fill a journal on the weapons combined. To risk tampering with ancient works and magicks was implicitly detrimental. He never could understand such a weakness as love. He never experienced it as a child, and brushed it off as merely the faulty heel of great warrior Achilles.

Studying the consuming darkness outside the dustily draped transom, Voldemort curtly nodded. "I do not see why not." He consented, tapping a long, bony finger on the grimy sill. "After my enemies are destroyed, I see no reason in keeping Amenophus. As long as I retain the Scepter, I will prolong my ultimate power."

"Good will not reign over thee. Nor my betrothal." Mystikos whispered into the fire, extending his greasy hands to touch the harmless flames.

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Hermione sighed in frustration. "We've got all these little fragments we've got to piece together. It's like interpreting a puzzle with broken clues."

"Broken pieces." Nikola corrected, scribbling on the side of her parchment. Hermione ignored the Entity and sifted through her notes. Ron's eyes were watery from reading so many books again, and the keeper muffled a yawn against his sleeve.

"You're sure they said the crescent moon, Harry?" she queried once more, furrowing her brows at her notes and astronomy charts. The seeker narrowed his green eyes and tossed his working quill down.

"I'm sure, all right? Next time, you get into his head and see for yourself." He snapped, standing to his feet and walking away. He wasn't in the mood for arguing and defending his visions today. His scar prickled something painful all night and day. It was prickling like mad through every class, to the point where he began to itch it roughly. It wasn't the best time to have a vision, what with his mind overloaded with the new prophecy and his new abilities: it pained him to admit that if Voldemort went lurking, he would find everything he needed and more. Crossing into the Divination aisle, Harry wondered if it was right to forgo Occlumency lessons, even if it was with Snape.

The library was unusually quiet; having spent weeks upon weeks with his housemates searching for information on the weapons, Harry was sure he had gotten the library's basic habits and few customary occurrences down. Normally, there was an influx of fifth and seventh years right after classes: today, only a handful of Slytherin fourth years and a blonde Ravenclaw were present.

His colored fingers took in the textures of the aged and newer Divination tomes as he remembered his dream. The empty feelings of rage and recklessness from that night plagued his mind at odd periods throughout the day. To think about how close he had come to suffering the loss of his godfather, and the irresponsibility with which he chased after a trained Death Eater made him queasy. Not only could someone more significant could have been killed, but he as well. Though he failed to reach the part of his memory where his attempt to cast the Cruciatus Curse was futile, much of him was satisfied to not have to experience the recollection once more.

Madam Pince's hawk-like gaze was on the entrance, eyeing entering and exiting pupils with revulsion. Harry pulled out a copy of Prophesied Persons of the Punic Wars and tucked it under his arm, breathing evenly. There were only a few days until Voldemort and his Death Eaters would be coming to Hogwarts for the weapons. He knew it was perilously hazardous, but he brightened in the fact knowing he had wrestled with himself and his closest friends to inform Dumbledore of what he saw.

In the end, Harry's averse argument of his vision's possibility of being a fraud won out, and he decided to inform the headmaster later rather than sooner. Deep down he realized, like Hermione pointed out, he was putting the school at risk: but it was already at risk when Dumbledore daringly hid them there.

The fair-haired student at the table nearby scratched their head in thought as the young wizard made his way back to the table. Nikola and Hermione were speaking in hushed tones about her writings, and Ron and Kaltag moved just beyond his sight behind the bookshelves.

Today's task was simple: the prefects would find information on the description of the Ravenstone Scepter and the Sword of Amenophus; Harry, Nikola, and Starbuck would try to figure out more of Ella's prophecy. Harry was pleased to note Parvati and

Lavender were holding up their end of the deal; Ella was left untouched, and surprisingly, no one in the school knew about what happened in Divination that afternoon. It must have been a first: gossip that had yet to befall Hogwarts' usually astute ears.

The Entity and the witch stood up, retreating between the shelves for answers. Starbuck pored over Hermione's individual (and thickly-stacked) notes on her notions about the prophesied child silently. Kaltag and Ron returned with a book or two each, and both, Harry observed, were deep in thought.

The friends reconvened as Harry flipped through the prologue of the Divination volume by Derkis Durriken, with Nikola and Hermione returning shortly. "Anything yet?" the female prefect asked the group at large. Kaltag rolled the tiny black-red sphere of his chain between his thumb and forefinger while the others declined.

"Other than the fact canary stones are rarer than sorcerer's stones, no." Ron quipped with an edge of gripe in his tone. Harry lazily flipped through the Hannibalistic Period before he shut the manuscript with a dull 'thud.' Removing his spectacles, he ran his moist, warm hands over his flushed face vigorously, making his cheeks red. His eyes wandered to the large mid-wall to floor windows a good fifty feet away, baring the gray, stormy sky to all. Harry felt exactly how the weather appeared: miserable.

The hoary sky thundered and pounded buckets of rain on the ripened enchanted establishment, and green eyes watched in dull enthusiasm. Rain pelting the detailed glasses was more interesting than reading about Oswald the Abnormal Oracle of the twelfth century. Ron had remedied to doodling on the outskirts of his notes; Hermione diligently recorded every scrap of information she found, no matter how insignificant; and the Smythes were in various stages of unrest or moodiness, Nikola being the most temperamental of the three.

Numbers rose and dwindled in the library, and Harry remained surprised testing students weren't around to fill in the bare tables. Examining a freckle on his wrist, Harry hardly took notice of Ron towering over him, yawning.

"We've—" he yawned tiredly, the cracking of his bones clearly audible as they had been immobile. "—Sorry—been through every

book here." He snapped his knuckles soundly, and pulled off his tie, dumping it in a spine-splintered copy *Choose Your Weapon: Wand or Sword?*

"Oh, Ron." Hermione rebuked, scribbling a sketch furiously on a sheet of parchment. He pointedly gave her an exasperated look, rotating his shoulders.

"Hermione, it took us weeks to find what little information this place offered on the weapons. I'm guessing that's about as much as there will be." He proclaimed, wrinkling his crimson eyebrows. The witch heatedly gave the wizard a look, then returned to her depiction. "I doubt we'll find Youngblood's journal's in here. I seriously doubt there is a student in this castle who's his heir." Hermione placed her quill down, folding her fingers to relax her knuckles. Harry stood, followed by everyone else but Starbuck, who had turned the stiff wooden seat backwards an hour ago.

"We're not looking for them," she reproached, glaring at the boy with equally shiny brown eyes. "We need to figure out who has them, what they're capable of, and where the underground caves of Hogwarts are located—all before the next crescent moon. Mind you, that's next Friday." The others seemed to grow tense at any mention of Voldemort's forthcoming foray onto the grounds. Harry spotted the blonde student buried in books at the next table rocking, as if hearing a noiseless tune.

"Perhaps a map?" Kaltag suggested, rolling his cuffs up his forearm. "Do you know of any teacher with a draft of the castle?"

"This place was built with magic," Starbuck interrupted. "I doubt a blueprint was needed."

Ron gave Harry an impish, knowing look as they made suggestions. "Other than Dumbledore and the Ministry, I'd think Filch has one. But you'd need an Invisibility Cloak to sneak in his office." Hermione's tawny orbs narrowed at her fellow partner.

"Good luck getting one." Kaltag despondently replied. Harry blinked at his words awkwardly. The bushy-haired mastermind adjusted her pin on her house robes, with a frown.



"You'd have better luck breaking into the Ministry than Filch's office." She glumly affirmed. "And probably only a handful of teachers know of caves under the school. I never thought there were places lower than the dungeons here."

"Something Hogwarts, A History failed to highlight. I tell you, that book needs updating." Ron charged, overlooking the witch's scowl. He brightly turned to his companion. "Know of any other maps, Harry?"

Harry could not honestly say he knew of any caves. Fred and George had the map, much longer, in fact, than him, so they must have unearthed something. And truth be told, he had not taken heed of the other areas while he was escaping detentions and whatnot.

"Er, I think Fred and George are your best bet." He proposed to his comrade, who frowned. "They knew all the secret passages, didn't they?" Ron's cheeks tinged at the news, but he nodded, mumbling he'd owl them when he got the chance. The Gryffindor seeker watched as Hermione tightly crossed her arms over her chest and paced slowly, with her eyebrows set in profound contemplation.

"The weapons have been here all this time." She summarized, squinting her baffled eyes in thought as she continued to pace. "Dumbledore knows where it is, and most likely McGonagall. Both sides want the weapons for obvious reasons."

Harry mussed his unruly black hair some more with a sigh. This they already knew. "Where are you going with this, Hermione?" The witch held his gaze for a moment, breaking in her contemplative stride to seek something behind his piercing look.

"What do we know?" she extended an arm and held up two fingers. "Two weapons, made by Areus Youngblood, and two dark lords are after them. One wants them for power; the other wants Amenophus' jewels. There was a prophecy this week." She whispered the last part so low Harry had to step closer to hear her. "And who we've been searching for? The Child of Phoenix." Hermione ended on a fierce note; anger was plainly evident in her glittering eyes.

"Hermione, what are you getting at?" Nikola queried, slipping a misplaced tuft of blonde hair back behind her ear. The witch breathed maddeningly through her nose, increasing her pacing.

"It all comes back to this Child of Phoenix. Someone or something knows what we're up to." She muttered in irritation. "They're feeding us clues and inklings." Harry had never heard Hermione sound so—so crazy. It was like she had sipped some of Lykaeos nutters' juice to come up with paranoid theories and figures. Calmly, he appraised her.

"Are you all right, Hermione?"

"Think about it," she continued, discounting Harry. "We spent weeks in the library looking up the weapons, and we find information on both in one sitting. And we can't forget the centaurs bursting in and accusing a student of killing their own." She rapidly spun on her heel, making the boys flinch. "Now, in one week you four hear a prophecy, Voldemort uncovers his plans, and we know what one of the weapons looks like."

"Are you saying this is a set up?" Starbuck asked, his face masked in confusion. At this, Harry's shoulders drooped. Was someone planting these things for them to wind up in trouble? Would this be like the Department of Mysteries all over again?

"No—I don't know." Hermione rationally answered. "But I'll bet something else will be uncovered this week." She stubbornly stated. "Something vital to this entire weapons scheme. The weapons are right under our noses," she ambled thoughtfully in a line. "We've probably seen them loads before, but thought nothing of it. Somewhere we'd never place."

"Right," Ron who had remained quiet finally spoke. "So how do we go about getting it, run around and randomly ask people: 'have you seen these mental weapons? We know one's a sword with bloody costly yellow jewels in the hilt, and have these wicked carvings on it. So, have you?' Or someone we think is mental is just going to come forward and tell us they've seen them." Ron proffered snappily, folding his arms in despair.

"Honestly..." Hermione glowered, looking every bit upset with the skeptical Weasley. The others knowingly kept silence taking no one's side, while beginning to move toward the shelves.

"Oh, I've seen that before."

There was a considerable break in proceedings as the six remained frozen at the recognizably wistful comment.

Twelve eyes unhurriedly slid over to the blonde Ravenclaw, sitting one table over, surrounded by books. Squinting somewhat, Harry could see the tomes were on a multiplicity of magical subjects—O.W.L.s.

"You have?"

"Yes, Ronald." She responded dreamily, toying with her lengthy flaxen braid. "I have. Forgive me for intruding on your conversation. I was reading up on Djibouti-Born Furry Fumplookers for O.W.L.s. Important species: the annual birth of their young brings rain to eastern Africa." Hermione quietly issued a disbelieving breath, crossing her arms before her. From the composure she held, Harry surmised she was not in the best mood for Luna's delusions tonight.

"Have you really seen the Sword?" Kaltag queried in blatant lack of credence. Luna's sharp eyes settled on Harry, before she stood from her chair and set her quill down. Leisurely, she made her way to their table, flexing her fingers loosely.

The eccentric Ravenclaw pointed to the stack of parchments in front of Hermione's seat. "May I?" The brown-haired prefect shrugged stiffly, offering an extended hand at her notes. Harry watched in fascination as Luna languorously swept to Hermione's annotations and bent to read them.

She dreamily tilted her head to analyze comments scrawled neatly on Hermione's parchment, studying them closely. Her protuberant eyes followed every curve of the loose sketch in detail, widening and constricting at every so often interval. Hermione appeared intolerant of the fifth year's long examination of her notes. Harry could see her biting her lips, holding back from commenting unkindly.

Luna's pink lips skewed to the side as she traced a finger over the etched words. Ron slowly brought fingers to his eyes to rub them in annoyance. "Before the sun rises, Loony—er, Luna." Ron hastily corrected, wincing at his mistake. But the Ravenclaw had not given the impression that she had heard him, as she muttered a line over and over to herself.

The Quidditch seeker muffled a yawn as he leaned on the back of the chair, propping his head up with a fist. Luna was always undoubtedly there when they were stumped, offering suggestions Hermione wouldn't dare think up. It was usually her wild predictions that really put things in perspective for them. He remembered last year when he had first viewed the Thestrals, how she spoke about them. It was also Luna who seemed unfazed as they rode the frightful beasts to the Department of Mysteries.

"Anything?" Hermione civilly inquired, gripping the back of the library chair tiredly. Luna flipped to the subsequent leaf, considering the remarks. Nodding mostly to herself, Harry stood straight as she pointed out a specific line.

"Steel hilt adorned with rare canary jewels," she reiterated, wrinkling her pale brows. "...And runic carvings at the edge of the blade and along the hilt." She continued, shutting one eye to read the line over again. The odd Ravenclaw inclined her head, returning to silence. When she did not explain, Harry stood to cross his arms as well.

"So?" Ron prompted, earning eager gazes from the others. "Have you or haven't you?" Her eyes turned to appraise the Weasley prefect, and his best friend watched as he shifted uncomfortably.

"I have." She repeated, tidily arranging Hermione's notes once more. She gave the sixth year genius an insular look, to which Harry saw Hermione elevate an eyebrow.

"And you saw it...where?" Starbuck urged, seizing the back of his chair in wait. Again, Luna's bulging eyes turned to appraise him, and she rolled her long plait between her fingers.

"In Defense Against the Dark Arts." She confessed with a tone of ennui. "On a wrinkled, yellowing piece of parchment on Professor Kenward's desk—in his office. A sketch, nowhere close to this one." She hesitated, gauging the sixth years' reactions as they soaked in the news. Harry absentmindedly pulled out his chair to fall into it, stunned. Professor Kenward?

"A piece of parchment?" Ron questioned in uncertainty, shifting his head back in peculiarity. "Is he after the sword?" Hermione, too, sat

in her seat, revising her notes. Something tugged at Harry's mind, but he couldn't understand what.

"He can't be evil," the Gryffindor quietly defended. "He's...nice."

Ron released a terse snort. "Yeah, and so was Quirrell, and though Moody was strange, you have to admit, he turned Malfoy into a ferret...."

"People aren't always who they seem," Nikola finally spoke, oddly turning to her brothers as she said this. "As we know all too well." The Smythe Beings declined to comment. Luna hung quietly by, regarding the corollary of her disclosure. But it was Hermione, who was busy sifting through notes, which had appeared to piece the information together.

"Wait a moment," she rounded on the Ravenclaw. "You said you saw this on an old piece of parchment?" The fifth year nodded, oddly, Harry determined, with reluctance. "Did the parchment look very old?" Again, with disinclination, Luna nodded. Hermione beamed both to herself and the Ravenclaw, and she swiftly flipped through her remarks again. But Harry, though he could not read the emotions of people, Luna wore her uneasiness on her sleeve, as perceptible as the patch on her Ravenclaw cloak.

"Luna," he started, furrowing his brows. "What are you not telling us?" Ron and Kaltag ended their low conversation as Harry's inquiry received a lengthy hiatus of sound from the fifth year. He tapered his green eyes at the round-eyed Ravenclaw. Of all the time he'd known her, she hadn't ever been nervous. Now, she was essentially mangling her black cloak between her fingers. "Luna?"

"Luna, if there's something you're keeping," Hermione spoke with worry, "you have to tell us. Lives depend on this information." The blonde witch creased her brows and swallowed. Hermione faced away from her writings to stare up at the Hogwarts student. "Please."

With bated breath, the others observed as Luna slowly agreed, defeat crossing her glossy eyes. What had been so terrible that she had to keep it a secret? With disappointment, Harry realized Kenward might have threatened her if she knew. His profile seemed to get more indistinct and unclear in Harry's view. The Ravenclaw

oddball flattened the wrinkles in her cloak before acknowledging the fervent stares of wizards and Celestials alike.

"Professor Kenward had taught us a spell to fend off forest creatures during class that day," she began, her tone one of wonder and awe. "But I wasn't sure if they could work on more exotic creatures." No ill comments were made as she lightly emphasized 'exotic creatures.' Harry was sure the Crumple-Horn Snorkack was definitely on her mind at the time. "I remained behind to question him on the spell's usefulness, but he had already gone into his office.

"The door was ajar, so as the class left, I headed up the stairs. He changed the office around since Umbridge had left, and his desk was closer to the door." She chewed her lip, staring at the dusty floor of the library. Madame Pince was at her desk, interrogating a group of second year Gryffindors and Paraffins just entering. "And there it was, poking out of an old book. It wasn't realistic, but it was a pretty firm sketch on the paper. Anyone could have seen it from just looking in the crevice of the door."

Silence met her explanation, and the others retreated into thought. But Harry saw Luna still biting her bottom lip, and her eyes were regretful.

"Luna..." he firmly declared, uncertain where the pitch of threat was summoned from. "That's not all, is it?" The Ravenclaw, looking every bit as frazzled as Hermione had during her third year with all her classes, finally sighed, playing with her lock of hair. Ron scooted closer to Harry as Hermione lifted her quill to a fresh sheet of parchment.

"No." She admitted. "I not only saw the parchment," she slowly revealed, "but I saw the sword, too."

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(1) Don't know if Parvati or Padma are Indian. If you know, let me know, you know? ;)

A/N: Revised chapter. Review, peeps!

A/N 2: Just a warning, POVs may and will change in later chapters. You know the drill.

A/N 3: You obviously recognized the highly italicized portion from OotP, hardcover pages 804 – 809. As always, it belongs to J.K. Rowling; I just tweaked the scene to my advantage. As you already read...

#### Chapter Eighteen Preview:

- 1). How do you solve a mystery with broken pieces?
- 2). The final discovery before the weapons are unchained...
- 3). Kenward—good guy, or your typical DADA professor?

## Chapter Eighteen: On the Broken Pieces

A vivid cobalt jet of light whizzed past Harry's ear, just short of grazing his earlobe. But the young wizard was none the wiser. As the members of the Elite Defense Association practiced their latest spell—a handy curse to freeze part of your opponent's body temporarily—their leader was a bit preoccupied with remembering what had transpired a few days ago.

Hermione's scratching quill faltered and made an unsightly disfigurement on the rest of the parchment. Noiselessly, the feathered tool floated to the wooden floor below, staining the board with its inky liquid. Harry stared wide-eyed at the anxious Ravenclaw, hooking her flushed digits between empty buttonholes.

"You...saw the sword?" Ron's words were more of a statement than an inquiry. "Actually saw it, yellow gems, carvings and all?" Luna nodded with slight hesitation, her protuberant eyes widening as the sextet of Paradors broke out in shocked mutters. Harry lowered his brows in a mixture of surprise, bafflement and betrayal. Kenward...Kenward was evil? The man, so Lupin-like in instruction and friendship had one of the weapons they were seeking?

"Is Dumbledore mad?" Starbuck hissed, his chocolate eyes broad and untamed. "Trusting a stranger with these tools?" Hermione blinked at the Being before stooping to reclaim her quill. Luna stood quietly by, her large eyes sweeping over the dissenting group.

"Perhaps he believes it is best in the hands of a stranger," Kaltag philosophized, sending the flaxen-haired Being a disapproving look, "as a stranger may not have the knowledge to wield it." Harry blinked at the student's expression, his brows furrowing in disbelief. The Celestial's brown-eyed brother glowered at the prefect, shaking his head. Carefully, the ginger-haired Smythe held his stare before he shrugged in defeat, sagging unceremoniously in his chair. "Dunno, maybe Kenward doesn't know its importance yet?"

The raven-haired wizard slowly drooped to cradle his head in his hands. Kenward...of all people; a virtual stranger. He hated to acknowledge it, but Dumbledore could have even trusted Snape with a task as simple as this. Perhaps the headmaster was finally gracing the period of senility. Whether she had read Harry's mind or was merely responding to the Beings' statements, Hermione firmly



declared, "Dumbledore must have a valid reason for giving Kenward Youngblood's sword."

"Why?" Harry frowned, lowering his brows. "Because he's Dumbledore, Hermione?" He was vaguely aware of the crease between the clever witch's eyebrows. "Because he always does things perfectly?" Loathe divulging it, Harry felt some anger towards the witch. Was she as naïve as the rest of them? Dumbledore was far from the unfaultable Eradicator of Evils as everyone viewed him.

"Does he really need a reason, Harry?" she countered, appraising him in masked concern.

"Defense professor aside and all," Ron broke between the tense friends, "Kenward's got the sword right now." The flame-haired teenager leaned back into his seat, crossing his arms. "Either he must play an important part in this, or he's just the guardian."

"Or maybe he's the bloody Child of Phoenix," Harry grumbled to himself, shutting a useless tome. "Better him than I." The Gryffindor heaved a burdensome sigh as the others sat in thought once more. Of course it had to be the defense teacher to be in the midst of all the trouble. Harry was surprised to find he was not at all too shocked to learn this; when have any of their Defense instructors ever been normal?

The uncomfortable Ravenclaw rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, humming quietly to herself as she toyed with her braid. "So, Kenward has it." Nikola summarized.

"We've settled that already." Kaltag barked in irritation at the blonde Paraffin. She ignored him as she twisted her quill.

"And Voldemort wants it."

"Where have you been?" Kaltag hissed once more. "What, have you also come to the conclusion that Mystikos may be helping him?" The crimson-haired Paraffin received a base glare from his brother. Either Kaltag did not notice it, or he had merely brushed it off.

Hermione was busily tapping her quill in abstraction, worrying her bottom lip. Harry could tell the inner workings of her brilliant, complicated mind were connecting pieces of the puzzle they had

missed. And right on cue, her brown eyes twinkled and snapped to the whistling Ravenclaw. Luna was startled from her unusual tune by Hermione's sharp voice. "Did you see anything else besides the sword and old parchment?" It seemed the odd witch was raking through her thoughts for answers. She finally nodded, albeit after quite some time.

"Books." She spoke distractedly as she admired Hermione's quill. "Old books." Luna added for emphasis, before cocking her head to the side. "There was something else on the bottom of the parchment, but I couldn't make it out. I saw the end of a loop or band of some sort." Harry or Ron hadn't the slightest clue what made the clever prefect so excited about Luna's answer, but Hermione quickly set her quill to work as Luna glided back to her table blissfully. The Gryffindor seeker simply frowned at the conversations, none of which put his mind at ease.

The DA leader crinkled his brows in anxiety. Everything seemed to turn downhill since their last library visit. He found himself drifting off during classes and evening work, wondering if any of this situation had to deal with him. True, he was the main connection to Voldemort, and he knew what the Dark Lord was after, but if it was true...if he was the Child of Phoenix, then any notion of a normal life was immediately squashed. He could—would never be ordinary, and he found it especially bothersome he was never offered a chance at normalcy.

"Harry!" said boy's shoulder was jerked roughly back, pulling him toward the bookcases and out of his dismal reflection. Right where his head would have been, an intense blue jet of light cracked through the air and left a jagged, sharp trail of ice along the forward wall. The hand still gripped his shoulder as his emerald eyes widened at the offending result that could have been disastrous.

Slowly, he spun wildly to face his rescuer, none other than a thin-lipped Hermione Granger. "Wouldn't harm you to pay attention for once." She scolded, before he could even mutter his gratitude. He nodded pensively and eyed the rest of the group, busily hexing their partners. Due to such vigorous activity in spell-work around the room, he couldn't decide which wand the spell originated from. Selene Magnus was fending quite well for herself as her panting, red-faced sister, Endymion, recklessly flung hex after heated hex at her; Michael Corner was shaking his wand hand, his face crimson

as Ginny triumphantly smirked. Nott and Zabini were lazily practicing with a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff respectfully; Harry frowned deeply as he noticed Lisa Turpin with two other Entities he couldn't remember name wise, simply sitting on the bolsters and conversing.

Off in the corner, Kaltag was jiggling his leg in annoyance while Icarus busied himself with wide arm circles. Ron was reluctantly working with an inattentive Cho, whose hurt expression barely left that of partners Ginny and Michael. Bright lights illuminated the room as spells flew in random directions at moving targets. Harry lowered his brows thoughtfully as he observed the marred walls around him stained from missed targets. He wondered just how long he had been thinking about the library conversation a few nights ago and the number of spells he narrowly escaped from the Elite Members.

He noticed Cho's tearful expression remained on that of her significant other, learning the basic wand movements from partner Ginny. An irritated Ron took up partnership with a wan Ella, whose own partner, Zacharias, was busily watching the Magnus sisters duel with enthralment. Harry dodged a blood red spell from Endymion's wand as he walked toward the front of the room. Digging the whistle out of his trouser pocket, he anxiously blew the small device, allowing the shrill sound to rile everyone's hearing and force all to tense.

The last of the incanted enchantments struck any of the four walls or — quite few — collided with their human targets. All eyes fell on the frowning Defense Association leader, clutching the whistle with an unreadable expression. "Same time next week, everyone. Remember to practice with partners on your same parallel, and not in the corridors." His intense emerald gaze landed on the apologetic grin of Colin Creevey, who stowed his wand out of sight. Drawing a heavy sigh, Harry nonchalantly waved his hand. "Dismissed." The members of the Elite Defense Association wandered noisily toward the exit of the slightly echoing room, their topics ranging from their spell strength, to the next Hogsmeade weekend.

The Slytherins quickly left, nodding stiffly to Harry, while everyone else stridently followed their friends to their common rooms. Endymion, he observed, limped slightly after them with a firm, yet striking glare; Selene, on the other hand, did not appear at all accomplished or smug. Harry had a strong urge to tell off Lisa Turpin and the other Entities for not using their entire time to work

on the assigned spell, but he held his tongue, only giving them a frown.

Hermione and Ron already set to work with the Smythes to collect and stack cushions. Nikola had made a game out of it with the animated Starbuck, with brother and sister racing to see who could collect and stack the quickest. The Entity obviously had the advantage with her inhuman speed, as the floor was nearly cleared of pillows by the time Harry made it toward their area.

Ron dropped onto a high mound of cushions as Hermione busily helped the firstborn Smythe assemble books on the shelf. Harry, exhausted from failing to think straight during the meeting, fell onto the short stack beside Ron. "I reckon I wouldn'tve gone very far tonight with that spell," the Gryffindor began, obviously wound up, and crossing his arms. "What with Chang sniveling and all. In a right state when Corner paired with Ginny." Ron's ears turned red at the sixth year's mention. "Wasn't at all paying attention 'til I froze up both her legs."

Hermione swiftly stood and turned to Harry with a dissatisfied look. "Hers wasn't the only one whose mind was elsewhere." The witch condemned, staring squarely at the dark-haired seeker rubbing his eyes. The Celestials gave Hermione a baffled look, before cautiously glancing at the pensive Gryffindor. Before he could open his mouth, the annoyed witch cut him off. "Where was your head tonight?" Harry couldn't help but level the impertinent bushy-haired girl with a glower.

"Clearly elsewhere, Hermione. I find it no business of yours." He seethed, quickly standing up from his seat and taking long strides toward the door. He did not register the look of fear and insult on the prefect's face, or the expressions of shock from the others. He slammed the door behind him with a resounding 'thwack,' treading in irritation back to the tower. The green-eyed wizard couldn't help but wonder if he was the only one who cared about the likely possibility of his being this ridiculous Child. Harry rapidly approached the fourth floor corridor, even now contemplating his circumstances.

Though somewhat remorseful about snapping at Hermione, Harry still thought she deserved it. Perhaps Ron or the others didn't merit his storming out, but at the present moment, all Harry wanted was to

be by himself, where no one could judge him with furtive looks or goading words.

Naturally, no wishes, dreams or thoughts from the Boy-Who-Lived were ever taken into consideration.

"Potter!" Harry could hear the familiar disdain with which his name was spat, and could almost feel the spray of saliva in his direction. Exhaling sharply, the brave wizard spun on his heel to glare at Draco Malfoy and—surprisingly—his bodyguards Crabbe and Goyle.

He appeared awkward from the other times Harry had seen him; by all means the signature, belittling smirk was plastered across his face, and he sauntered with purpose and arrogance. Crabbe and Goyle's forms were burly as usual, and Harry could hear their bones crack from afar in threat. But now, it seemed much more crowded than usual; Harry assumed it was because Malfoy was devoid of Xenik for company, since the two were always seen striding smugly with their entourage trailing four steps behind.

Rolling his eyes in weariness, Harry folded his arms and confronted the three. "What, Malfoy?" he questioned with a tone of tedium. Shaking his head in annoyance, Harry added, "Should we kick it off now or later? That's how this gab will end like, anyhow. You on the ground, and my wand pointed at your head..." The gorilla-like guards swelled with intimidation as Malfoy scowled.

"I abhor you, Potter." The hefty boys grunted rough chuckles.

"As expected." He spoke, tightening his arms. The Slytherin prefect stepped forward as if to threaten Harry, or rather anticipate him to stumble back in fright. The teenager simply raised a brow at the Slytherin, flicking his eyes every-so-often at his thick right and left hands. Malfoy's robes billowed slightly as he walked, as if to intimidate Harry even further. "Is there a reason for you disrupting my evening promenade?" Draco merely narrowed his eyes at the sixth year.

Raising his sharp chin and hardening his silver eyes, Malfoy puffed out his chest as if he had no choice. He bossily declared, "I, Draco Malfoy, being a respected prefect of Slytherin House, find—according to the regulations set forth by the noble governors of our instit—"

"Crikey, you're not serious, are you?" Harry twisted around to match the face to the entering voice, none other than Ron Weasley's. The keeper's countenance coiled in disgust, as he took long treads to his best friend's side. "The ferret's actually reprimanding you?" The spectacled student slowly turned his expression of perplexity to his housemate, still glaring at the Slytherins. He knew what a reprimand was, but he was never punished so formally.

"What?" Harry dumbly interrupted.

"He's citing the Divergence of Judgment Decree," Ron knowledgeably explained. "Or, he reckons that a ruling from a higher professor is unfair. Prefect privilege." Harry nodded in understanding, vaguely wondering if he would have known the Prefect Handbook from cover to cover if he were made prefect in fifth year. Malfoy appeared peeved that he had been disrupted in his proclamation, but he lifted a brow at Ron.

"Remarkable, Weasley." Ron and Harry blinked at the prefect, furrowing their brows suspiciously. "Didn't actually think you'd follow the handbook, let alone be able to read." The tips of Ron's ears and his cheeks flushed with familiar anger. "What with your family only living with one candle between the forty of them in that slum, I didn't think your parents could teach all of you weasels to read." He drawled unkindly. Ron's fists clenched at his sides as Crabbe and Goyle chortled behind the smirking Malfoy.

Harry's hands slipped into his robes as his right hand tightened over his wand. Draco seemed unfazed by their anger, only, squaring his shoulders haughtily. "Furthermore, it is my belief that your—what are they called.... Ah, yes." He bared his teeth in a feral leer. "Your Defense Associations—piteous title, if you ask me—are not offered to every house fairly." Harry jerked his head back slightly. What was he playing at?

Malfoy sneered somewhat, cupping his chin with a pale hand. "I must tell you Potter. Your condescension has alarmed and upset the Slytherins. All the purebloods. And, not to mention, insulted me." His tone was one of false dissatisfaction, and he stared between both boys as he spoke. "I'm hurt. Crushed."

"If only." Harry hissed, narrowing his eyes.

"The Slytherins were offered the chance to join the DA," Ron defended with distaste, crossing his arms angrily. "Every Head of House placed the handbills in their respective common rooms." His expression became quite thoughtful as he shot his housemate a look. "But with Snape, there's no telling, the git." He murmured to the seeker.

"But I find the organization does not cater to all houses," Malfoy argued sneeringly. "And I fail to think the governors would be pleased to find out Dumbledore sanctioned your little fan club." Harry exhaled exasperatedly, throwing the prefect a look.

"Well, I for one am terribly sorry for the fact the group doesn't train Death Eaters to your liking," he jeered acerbically, gripping his hidden wand. "Since it is a Defense group." Malfoy rose to his full height, his pale features reddening dimly.

"How dare you imply we are Dark Wizards, Potter?" Malfoy hissed, broadening his chest. His superior tone sounded anything but offended; in fact, Harry detected a faint trace of merriment. "Your assumptions further alert me to suspicion of wrongdoing and prejudice among your assembly."

"Come off it, Malfoy." Ron directed. "Whether it's official or not, every member of the DA knows one of your number is likely to spy for You-Know-Who." The Slytherin leered challengingly, his malevolent expression somewhat disturbing.

"Luckily, I've come up with a solution to your problem."

"Since when was it my problem?" Harry countered, very annoyed at the charge. Silver eyes danced spitefully in the faint torchlight, as Lucius Malfoy's son smirked.

"I have decided to take it upon myself to create an organization for the rejected Slytherins," he revealed, looking every bit self-satisfied. "As a response to your mockery." Harry nearly threw his head back in laughter, picturing Malfoy leading a group of Slytherins in defense. Ron was obviously restraining his urge, too, and together the Gryffindors shifted restlessly before the trio of Serpent Country.

"First, Malfoy," Ron began, a tinge of amusement in his tone, "there is already a group formed for that cause. You may have heard of them—Death Eaters?" Harry was satisfied that the pale boy trembled with scarcely controlled fury. "And secondly, you need to get the nod from Dumbledore. And I've no doubt he'll turn you down. He may be out of the tree, but he's no fool."

Malfoy tapered his eyes into serpentine slits at Harry, before loosely unfolding his arms. Behind him, Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles and flexed their thick arms, barely growling at the duo. Raising his jaw in defiance, the Slytherin tensed his jowl and looked at the two with dull, gray eyes. "We'll see." He whispered sharply. Giving the rival seeker a challenging look, the Slytherin beaters and seeker turned the opposite direction, heading for the dungeons.

Both Harry and Ron remained in stiff silence as they watched the Slytherins depart. Neither boy spoke a word to the other as they spotted the last Slytherin cloak swish around the corner. "D'you reckon he was bluffing?" The redheaded keeper started, taking the lead back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry shook his head to clear it before he matched Ron's lanky gait. Frowning deeply, Harry adjusted his glasses.

"It is Malfoy. But for some reason," Harry paused, glancing at the ominous, moonlit sky before answering. "I think he's telling the truth."

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Malfoy continually shot Harry celebratory smirks in their shared classes after their confrontation. Harry hadn't received any response from Dumbledore or any other authority figure about Malfoy's decree. Ron had not spoken about it since, and Hermione was not speaking to Harry at all. He supposed her annoyance was warranted, because of his gruff attitude toward her. But he wasn't up to apologizing yet.

Professor Snape slammed the door behind him and stalked down the aisle, his robes billowing, resembling a dark cloud of smoke. A few students straightened their postures in their seats, and some still trembled under the potion master's scowl. He took his position before the board instead today, whirling around fluidly to glare at the assortment of N.E.W.T./P.E.G.A.S.U.S. Potions students. "You will



get into pairs for this particular concoction," he began icily, with his black eyes boring into those who dared to stare back. As the students started, he quickly added, "Pairs that I will be selecting." A number of groans permeated the tense atmosphere before Harry narrowed his eyes.

As Snape began pairing them off, Harry noticed that Jace was missing. He was supposed to be teaching with Snape today. Looking over his shoulder toward the door, as if expecting the lively professor to jump from behind it excitedly, Harry lowered his brows in disappointment when the door remained closed. "...Granger, Dufresne." Hermione's eyes widened considerably, before she packed her items in her pewter cauldron and stood to move toward the wicked Aves deputy. "Nott, Weasley." Ella Burton stirred beside Nikola, locking her arms tightly as Nott stood.

Ron raised his brows and collected his things without a fuss. He and Nott sat in the vacant table before Harry's, without a word to one another. Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and connected his brows with a crease of his forehead. "Balthazar, Macmillan. Brocklehurst, Brown." The pairings went off with a number of Paradors averse to their Averin partners. Kaltag made a noise of dissent at being paired with Marieke; Starbuck paled when he was called along with Crabbe. Nikola's eyes were as wide as Galleons at being paired off with the gleeful Malfoy. In all honesty, Harry was sure Snape would have spitefully placed the rival seekers together.

"...Bulstrode, Potter." Harry blinked. Millicent Bulstrode? Slowly, he turned green eyes toward the expressionless frown on the Slytherin's face. She broke eye contact and began mechanically gathering her things, shaking Harry from his stupor. As he carefully and unhurriedly dumped his potion's kit and book into his cauldron, Ron spun around to whisper frantically, "How does Snape expect you to communicate? You're a bit rusty in 'Grunt,' I'd think." Nott didn't appear too amused about the affront, and Harry couldn't force a smile. Snape continued down the list ("Magnus, Smith.") as Harry dragged himself over to the front of the room. He was unhappy to note he was right behind Malfoy and one table near Faryn; but with Hermione not speaking to him and Nikola still in a state of shocked revulsion, he had no one.

Snape waved his wand at the board, snapping his orbs to the sixth years. "You have seventy-five minutes. Begin." The disgruntled

students set to work as Snape marched to his station. Harry vaguely heard his partner grunt something akin to, "Chop," but he couldn't distinct an instructing grunt from an irritated one. Hermione huffed all through the preparation stage of the potion, as the Aves Entity of Influence hissed at her for failing to follow her instructions. Hermione continued to follow at her own quick speed and pace, ignoring the Celestial's ruddy countenance.

Nikola was working a good distance from Malfoy as Harry noticed he kept throwing her overly charming glances. Several times as Harry was chopping his orchid roots, he looked up to find the Entity glaring at the Slytherin, who merely smirked. Ron and Nott seemed to be the only Slytherin/Gryffindor pair to get along civilly, as they performed their respective jobs in silence. Harry's attention was elsewhere as Millicent grumbled more commands falling to his inattentive ears.

Needless to say, Potions was in an uproar as Professor Jace finally graced them with his presence. Nott and Ron looked on somewhat in amusement as their completed silvery potion simmered on low; Hermione was red in the face from telling off Faryn minutes ago; expressions and emotions were swapped between Malfoy and Nikola, as he now sported a slightly glowing, crimson bruise in the shape of a hand on his right cheek, courtesy of the satisfied Entity of Intellect. Kaltag was irritated and fuming; not only with his self-satisfied partner, but also with the fact Ella was partnered with Xenik. His perfect potion didn't seem to be an important factor as he glowered at the Avian Being frigidly.

Harry was intensely upset at their progress. Their potion was bright, bubbly green, and not the hoary hue it should have been; but Bulstrode's grunts and grumbles were so muddled, he gave up trying to interpret them. After rereading the instructions carefully, he realized he hadn't diced the right ingredient, and Millicent was beating the potion like a violent wind turbine instead of lightly whipping it. Her grumbles seemed to be blaming him for their failed work.

Of course, Snape looked like he had just received an Order of Merlin, First Class, and a thousand Galleons. Gryffindor was down forty-five points from Hermione's outburst, Nikola's slap, Yorick's bicker with his partner, and naturally, Harry's distraction. He also lost another set of points when Snape decided Hermione and Harry's proximity

looked entirely too suspicious, and deemed their act to be cheating. Hermione did not protest, and Harry didn't want to give it a second thought, as his mouth would most likely lead them to their loss of twenty more points.

Jace raised his eyebrows, taking in the dungeon classroom with a deep frown. His eyes swept over the large number of brightly colored concoctions bubbling over their cauldrons' edge. Harry didn't miss the youthful professor's eyes brushing over the potion name and instructions. And he certainly didn't overlook Snape's jovial leer. Closing the door behind him and catching the decent students' reprehensible looks, scowls, and red faces, he smacked his hands together and shrugged. "All right. What'd I miss?"

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Harry sipped his citrus juice quickly while peering over the rim of his glasses. Across the table, a blurry Hermione's frizzy hair could barely be seen over the Charms text she was immersed in. Harry found it quite hard to fathom that Voldemort and his servants would be at Hogwarts in a matter of days, and Hermione still found time to ignore him. Ron seemed to sense the tension between the two, but did nothing to lessen it. He remained distantly faithful to both friends, choosing not to favor a particular side.

Post poured in as usual, with the vibrant selection of owls flapping excitedly over their masters' heads. Hermione barely raised her head a fraction, glancing around her general area for any owls with missives for her, before settling back into her book piercingly. Argentum, the Being of Elements' familiar, landed in a recognizable streak of silver, dropping a thick stack of parchment before the frowning Celestial with a heavy 'thud.' As Harry searched the feathers and wings for Hedwig, he caught a glimpse of the carefully scribbled, yet surprisingly short correspondence on the pile of forms.

Your destiny.

Love From,

Father

Kaltag proceeded to crush the note in his fist with a disappointed scowl. Harry faintly observed thin tendrils of smoke issuing from the corners of his fist.

The gray skies of the enchanted ceiling mirrored Harry's—and no doubt, Hermione's—mood and the teenager noted his owl wasn't among the post-bearers. Several minutes after the ruckus of feathers and screeches, Hermione studiously stood from her seat, snapping her book shut and throwing her satchel strap over her shoulder, all without looking at Harry.

Huffing in exasperation at the retreating form of Hermione, Harry pulled the last crisp of bacon into his mouth and shrugged on his rucksack. As he quickly stood from the crowded table of Gryffindors and Paraffins, he spotted Ron gulping down what was his third glass of citrus juice and yanking his bag swiftly to follow them. Harry continued walking briskly after Hermione, pushing a few milling third and fourth years out of his path. He realized if he didn't do this now, then there would most likely be dissension among them at a time when they truly needed one another.

He quickly caught up with Hermione's long strides as soon as he exited the Great Hall, with Ron wordlessly behind him. Hermione did nothing to acknowledge their presence, merely lifting her nose a bit higher toward the massive ceiling, while she had a firm grip on her overstuffed back. Narrowing his eyes slightly, Harry trailed the prefect closely, nearly sending Ron stumbling into him, at his sudden slower pace. "I reckon it wouldn't kill me to say I'm sorry, then." He self-righteously initiated.

Without glancing at him, Hermione calmly sniffed. "I imagine it wouldn't." She was still a bit miffed, he could determine, and he took a peek at Ron's impassive countenance. Harry gave a short nod to a passing seventh year Ravenclaw and pursued the cross witch through an empty corridor.

"Right, then." He spoke languidly, folding his arms. The green-eyed Gryffindor could barely see Hermione's profiled eye flare with anger. She swiftly turned her head to glare at him in annoyance.

"If that's your apology, Harry Potter—"

"Well, forgive me," he drew out in a light hiss. "I wasn't in the mood to be analyzed on Sunday. But you do realize Voldemort might be here on—oh, I don't know," he flippantly gestured at a passing torch. "Friday!" She tapered her eyes at him squeezing her jaw shut. Harry vaguely realized if they were not as alone in this corridor as he would have hoped, word would undoubtedly be spread by the second class that Voldemort's servants would be infiltrating the school. The last thing he wanted was Dumbledore disappointed in him about not seeking him with this information. Hermione seemed to be aware of this too, judging by her cold frown.

"I know that," she spat, turning a corner. "It's your attitude I don't understand." Harry abruptly paused in his tread, feeling the sudden jolt of Ron running into his back.

"Hey, mate!" he interjected, staggering back a few feet from the dark-haired Gryffindor. "Give a bloke a warning next time, yeah?" Harry paid little attention to his irritated friend's query. Instead, he tilted his head a bit to the side, watching Hermione's cloak fluttering behind her. Quickly he stepped after her, determinedly matching her pace and looking at her stoic profile.

"Enlighten me." He seethed.

Hermione released a dry laugh, animatedly throwing her head back and shaking it at the vaulted plafond. "As if we haven't all anticipated the fact Voldemort will be storming the school—underground—looking for these weapons. As if we all haven't been in the library for who knows how long, burying ourselves in these books not even relating to our schoolwork! All this wasted time!" Ron gave a slight nod of concurrence from his stance beside Harry. "Like we haven't been pouring ourselves into this research based on your visions! Yes, not everyone knows how you feel, Harry! It's true, not everyone went through what you go through year after year with him! This isn't like last year, Harry! You've a right to be angry and hate Voldemort for all he's done to you!" Her voice heatedly rose with every confession, and her face deepened in an angry magenta. Abruptly, she turned on her heel, causing Harry's chest to painfully collide into her stabbing index finger, poking him like an unyielding wand. She hissed the next words so quietly, the two boys had to strain to hear her. "But that does not give you the right to take your irritability out on me."

They stood there for a while, Hermione's finger digging into his sternum, and Ron regarding the livid witch with caution. Harry distantly knew Hermione would have snapped one of these days; he just never thought it would be at him. Yes, his crabbiness was uncalled-for; yes, he took it out on one of his best friends. And now, he felt fully remorseful for what he had done. Hermione gradually lowered her wand-mimicking digit, expectantly crossing her arms. Harry blinked a few times to clear his thoughts of shame to stare at the impatient prefect apologetically. "Then I'm sorry, Hermione. You're right. I've no right to toss my anger on you."

The Gryffindor genius graced the rueful wizard with a curt nod, thinning her lips uncannily like Professor McGonagall. "Accepted." She confirmed resuming her trek towards the Charms corridor. Hermione did not wait for the sixth year wizards to follow, moodily marching away. The dim noise of students leaving the Great Hall finally echoed faintly off the stone walls before Harry and Ron tailgated the temperamental prefect.

"Oy, remind me," Ron strained somewhat, nervously glancing at the back of his partner's shaggy head, "to never get on your bad side, ever." She twisted her head ever so slightly toward the two behind her, and Harry could see her pink cheek rise in an unseen smile.

Hermione was content all through Charms, never directly commenting to either boy. As informed by Hermione on the evening of the Preliminary Feast, Professor Flitwick taught them the Expansion Charm. Pairs or trios practiced on single-person desks, taking turns, as Flitwick waddled around the room improving everyone's spell casting.

Sometime during the flurry of noise and student departures, both Ron and Hermione left Harry behind. Not even one of the Smythes remained back for him, or any of his housemates. Frowning at a few packing Ravenclaws, Harry stuffed his texts into his school bag and marched toward the exit. As soon as he was over the threshold and into the crowd of passing students, he felt a soft tap on his arm. Narrowing his eyes and whirling around in infuriation, Harry intended to give his friends a stern talking-to; despite the rift he had just mended with Hermione. "You prats, I thought we always left together—"

Harry snapped his mouth shut when he faced Professor McGonagall. She had her signature thin-lipped expression affixed on her stony face, and she held a scroll of parchment tightly in her hands. "Ah..." he dumbly greeted in embarrassment. "Didn't...didn't see you there, ma'am."

Her face remained stony as her lips pursed. "Evidently, Potter." The sorted out Gryffindor let out a scant sort of noise halfway between a nervous chuckle and a wince. Glancing around at the passing strangers for some sort of assistance, Harry swallowed when he wasn't saved.

"I'm sorry, Prof—"

"As I am sure you notice I am neither Miss Granger nor Mr. Weasley," she cut in, staring down hard at him, "I will dismiss your behavior as a personal issue." He slightly nodded in affirmation, dishonorably studying his trainers. "To other matters, I am here to request that you come by my office some time before dinner, Mr. Potter." Harry curiously glanced at his Head of House as she gave him a calculating nod. "We've much to discuss." Professor McGonagall turned down the corridor with the passing pupils, her formidable gait resolute.

Harry stood by in bafflement, his mouth slightly parted as if to grace the empty air before him with an answer. But as he spun to notice the dwindling number of students in the corridor, he realized if he didn't run now, he'd be late to Defense. After all, being suspicious of the Defense teacher's motives wasn't a valid reason to skive off lessons. And it would definitely appear suspicious if neither of the six had shown up.

He brushed past a mousy second year and ducked into the Defense room seconds before class began. Panting from running such a distance, Harry slumped into his chair, earning bemused looks from his Celestial and Sixth Year tablemates. "Thanks, by the way for waiting for me." he derisively articulated, satisfied at the repentant looks both redheaded boys gave him.

"Just thought we'd've been late, is all." Ron attempted to explain. Harry bit back his retort as the office door swung open, and Kenward acknowledged the class with a small smile. With every footfall, Harry noted Ron turned a bit paler. Hermione stiffened in her

seat, and Nikola was biting her bottom lip. Kaltag's eyes seemed to dart everywhere but Kenward. Finally the man reached the ground floor, inclining his head to the sixth years. If they only knew what he was hiding, Harry mused irritably.

Kenward tucked his hands into his large pockets, scanning every face in the class. Harry blinked away his frustration as the man's eyes landed on him, and fought hard not to narrow his orbs when the man's face frowned for a moment before he smiled formally. "We've discussed quite a bit thus far," he began, bowing his head to study the floor while he started his pace. "And you all have been doing very well." There was a noise of surprise from the center of the room to which the young professor chuckled deeply. "Yes, even you, Neville.

"You all have been undoubtedly taught to rely on your wand in times of danger. A good method, true, but—this may shock some of you—you cannot rely on your wand all the time." Harry's brows furrowed at the wily instructor, as he loomed closer to the desks. Kenward went to the farthest desk, housing Parvati, Lavender and Padma, and scraped his fingers over the coarse wood in a pensive state. "So, what would you use if your wand was out of reach? What could you use?" Harry tapered his eyes at the professor, carefully marking his every move.

Kenward keenly looked toward their desks, as if waiting for them to answer. Harry vaguely registered the deep frown creasing the man's face; usually, they would be the first to comment or answer one of his questions. Not even Hermione seemed edgy enough to answer. "I'd go in with fists flyin'!" He looked over his shoulder as the class laughed at Seamus' suggestion. A faint smile appeared on Kenward's face.

"Perhaps, Mr. Finnigan." Responded the older wizard, closing in on another trio's school desk. "Any other ideas?" There was a low murmur as some students consulted with their neighbors. But the five in the front didn't budge. Harry figured Starbuck would be the same way, though he was nearer to the center of the room. Kenward's eyes swept the room, but lingered on his usually enthused students. Harry quickly looked away before the man could spot his wariness. "Ah, Mr. Macmillan."



Ernie cleared his throat significantly, distantly reminding Harry of his earlier encounter with Malfoy this past week. "I believe whatever is around you at the moment," he paused for significance, to which Ron rolled his eyes, "is what you can use as defense." Kenward nodded slightly.

"The matter around you," he continued in a more humble tone, "is what you must rely on. True, you may beat them with your fists," he paused to grin at Seamus. "But you would do well to first beat them with your mind." The dark-haired wizard absorbed the words, wondering if Kenward would be teaching them some sort of Legilimency or Occlumency. Kenward halted briefly before their table to study the boys (Ron released a muffled whine in anticipation) before he dropped unceremoniously on top of his desk.

"I once remember traveling—just traveling—in Finland, during autumn. It was..." he squinted his eyes at the ceiling in thought. "Evening, I believe. I had just left Kaukonen and was headed for Kolari. The residents were exceptionally kind. They were Muggles of course, but it didn't matter to them that I was a stranger." Harry stifled a sigh, propping his chin on his open palm. "I went on, moving quickly about my task; as it was nighttime, I needed to seek shelter before I could continue. I knew of the Finnish wizarding village nearby, but I had not been too optimistic. They were known for their carelessness and indifference, and I'd been warned they would attack any who approached their village, be it Muggle or Wizard.

"So, I moved on. I was pleased to note I'd taken the long route around the village, and thought I was safe." With a puckered brow, he suspended his tale, staring at the stone floor before resuming. "But a few villagers had been marking me, waiting for me to get to a particular point. After a few exchanged words, they attacked, attempting to steal my...my precious cargo.

"My wand was hidden in my carrier. I had thought it especially stupid of me to hide it particularly far from my grasp." A snicker broke his narration, and Harry turned to view the chortling Slytherins. "I thought it was the end. Four wands, and me, weaponless. With my wand in their possession, I thought I would probably leave the country in failure. If they let me live." His eyes twinkled at the thought and he grinned impishly. This, Harry thought, was unnerving. "Luckily, we were on the edge of forest land. With a few well-thrown stones, a couple of thwacks with branches, and a lucky bit where I

gained my weapon from my case, I fended off the wizards. And left the country unscathed."

Polite applause and muttered awes swept through the room, as he signaled them to end it. "But I was lucky enough to be near a forest. What if you had been in my position, but in an open field? What would you do then?" Harry lowered his brows, thinking to himself. An open field? If the grass was high enough he could hide; if not, digging up earth and lobbing dirt at his attackers would help.

He thought over this before he inwardly sighed. Wasn't he an Elemental? Couldn't he just will the ground to knot them up in vines and the like? "Or in the midst of a Muggle alley?" Kenward softly pushed, staring in Hermione's direction. She tightly pursed her lips, and looked away. Harry didn't miss her jaw tremble, as she very much wanted to answer. Kenward spun to face the boys, startling Ron and Kaltag. "Or if you were on an open street in Hogsmeade, fending off Death Eaters?" The green-eyed wizard crinkled his eyebrows before regarding Kenward. Was that a confession? Was he revealing a plan of some sort? Or was it a hint to his true identity; what Harry assumed (and hoped) to be the Child of Phoenix.

"I think a sword would help, wouldn't you, Harry?" Ron murmured. Blinking in surprise, Harry quickly scowled and prodded the prefect in the ribs. Ron winced, grabbing his side and glowering at his best friend. In front of them, Kenward considered the friends with a strange look, before he blinked away the peculiarity and warmly smiled, moving on.

Ron gulped, darting his eyes to his tablemates with a penitent look. "At least I didn't give it away by name." He reassured in a lower tone.

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Harry trudged down a scarcely filled passageway, stuffing his fists in his pocket. He pondered over what Professor McGonagall wanted of him. Perhaps Hermione hadn't fully forgiven him, and went to her for an intervention? He knew he was angry, but not that angry. Scrunching his brows together, he bit his lip in worry at the next possible choice. Did Madam Pince go to his head of house to complain about their sessions in the library? Or even the fact both he and Ron were in the library more frequently than normal? Or was it his words from this morning, after his friends left?

With his stomach in knots, Harry realized he was already at her door. Sighing to settle his anxiety, he brought his fist up to give three swift raps on her door. "Enter, please." Her firm voice called out. Harry hesitated, twisting the knob in his hand before he pushed the door open to enter. McGonagall's square spectacles were slipped down her nose and she wrote furiously on a piece of parchment. Harry closed the door behind him and waited to be acknowledged. He didn't wait long, as the formidable Transfiguration instructor forced out, "Take a seat, Potter," without looking up at him.

He obeyed, hastily sitting in one of the guest seats. She quit writing and dropped her quill in its inkwell, and let the official looking parchment sit to dry. As usual, she lifted her tartan tin box to his general area and offered, "Biscuit, Potter?" Harry politely refused this time, swallowing the lump already in his throat. McGonagall adjusted her glasses on her nose correctly, sniffing somewhat before setting the tin down. "Nothing to be nervous about, Mr. Potter." Harry shot his searching eyes to his professor, wondering how she read him so well.

"Ma'am?" McGonagall tightened her lips and appraised the Gryffindor seeker closely.

"I merely wanted to follow up on you, Potter." Harry was sincerely confused. "About your career choice. You still want to be an Auror, do you not?" Harry readily concurred, the knots lessening greatly in his stomach. She nodded curtly at him, and lifted a folder to her face that Harry had not seen. The wizened woman idly flipped through parchments, nodding and pursing her lips enough to make Harry nervous again. "So far, you're doing well in all of your N.E.W.T. classes," she turned a page slowly, making Harry huff. "Could do better in Transfiguration and Potions." Harry refrained from rolling his eyes and crossed his arms in silent protest.

"I will try, professor."

"Auror is a very prestigious title and occupation, Mr. Potter." She lectured doggedly. "And it isn't to be taken lightly." He nodded in agreement, allowing his eyes to wander on the gleaming Quidditch Cup on a mantle above her desk. Sighing to herself as she closed the file, McGonagall finally looked at the messy-haired student, clasping her wrinkled hands together. "That is all for now, Mr. Potter."

Unless you have any questions." Shaking his head before thinking, Harry waited patiently for her to dismiss him.

The walk back to the common room seemed shorter than the trip to McGonagall's office. As he gave the password, Nearly Headless Nick swept through the portrait, pausing to acknowledge Harry. Harry entered the common area to view Hermione and Ron with the Smythes, conversing in quiet tones over several schoolbooks. Ron was the first to notice and shot him a curiously disbelieving look.

"What's going on?" the teenager asked his friends. Hermione looked proud of something, while two of the others seemed a tad apprehensive. Ron huffed, rubbing his arms in the chilly room and motioned to Hermione.

"I think she's finally gone, she is," he clarified, staring at the witch with wild eyes. "You won't believe what she's thought up now." Hermione looked self-righteous and glowered at the redheaded Gryffindor.

"It isn't that horrid, Ron. A bit chancy, yes, but nothing we haven't done before. Or worse." She added with a knowing glint. Harry furrowed his brows at the implication, pushing away a few tomes to settle into the armchair.

"I'm game. What is it?" he inquiringly queried, ignoring the voice in his head shouting, "reckless!" Oddly enough, it sounded like Hermione. The brilliant witch beamed, scooting closer toward the book-laden table and waiting for Harry to lean close enough.

"Quite simple, really," she whispered, looking at the apprehensive faces of the other sixth years. "From what Luna's told us, I reckon some important indicators are in his office, right?" Harry nodded tilting his head in puzzlement. Shrugging nonchalantly, Hermione beamed toothily once more and stated, "Well, I say we go looking for them." Harry had to wobble his head somewhat to repeat the words in his mind. Sitting back into the plushy chair, he regarded the prefect with the content smile on her face.

"You mean break in," he corrected, lowering his brows. "And steal them." Ron nodded while Hermione raised her chest in deviation.

"Sneak in, and borrow." She emphasized. Both Gryffindors scoffed, smirking at their best friend.

"Like second year, then?" Ron pointed out, bringing his arms closer for warmth. "You realize Snape's probably still blaming Harry for the missing ingredients." The bushy-haired girl gave him a warning look to rival Mrs. Weasley's, and Harry stifled a laugh at his friend's reddening face.

"Uh, a story I'd like to hear when this is all over with," Nikola popped in with an interested grin. The others neither agreed nor disagreed with the perky Entity of Intellect.

"Hermione, what's the point of breaking into Kenward's office," Harry removed his round-rimmed glasses to rub his eyes, "if the sword isn't in there?" The sixth year female only pulled her Potion's book off of her lap, setting it down.

"I think there may be more than just the sword in his office," she revealed. "Even if the sword isn't in there." Harry held her unpromising look, wondering what she truly thought could be hidden.

"You think he may know something about..." Ron glanced around quickly to make sure the fourth years were absorbed in their work, "the Child?" Hermione looked to Ron with wrinkled brows and expanded her thinned lips.

She simply stated, "I think, perhaps." There was a pregnant stint in conversation as the sextet reflected over Hermione's suggestion. Harry contemplatively stared at the empty hearth, narrowing his eyes in thought. Of course they'd taken all manner of risks before, and this was menial compared to entering the Dark Forest, the forbidden Third Corridor, the Chamber of Secrets, and leaving school grounds on their ventures. Yes, they, or rather Hermione, had broken into Snape's private stores in second year to nick ingredients, but there was something strange about the Defense teacher. He had broken into the same office in fifth year under Umbridge's time to Floo call his godfather. Kenward may have been one of the nicest and productive ones, but Harry was somewhat apprehensive about learning all of his riddles.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, would someone please start a fire in here? It's freezing!" Ron exclaimed, crossing his arms for more heat and

glaring at the fireless hearth. Not a second later, the fireplace roared to life in a brilliant hue of orange. Raising his brows in puzzlement, Ron hmped to himself and spoke aloud, "Thanks, then."

"So, where've you been?" Hermione rounded on Harry, opening her Arithmancy book before her. Harry loosened his tie to answer, "McGonagall's office. She asked me to drop by." Ron immediately looked up, concern evident in his features.

"Not about Quidditch, was it?" The flame-haired keeper sighed audibly while sinking into his seat.

"About career advice." He reluctantly stated. "She wanted to make sure I was still up to par with my N.E.W.T. classes." Hermione nodded distractedly, pulling a quill from her bag.

"You'd have to have high scores to want to be an Auror," she addressed, sounding like the Transfiguration instructor. "Especially if you want to be an Auror."

"I think I'd rather like to go into something like that, but not too much the dark wizard hunting and all," Ron confessed. "Sort of monitoring and offering tips and such."

"You are a brilliant strategist." Hermione remarked with a grin. Ron's ears burned red as the witch's eyes never left her book. Kaltag shifted across from them, setting aside the large stack of parchment from this morning with an appearance of interest.

"Sounds good, but I'd much rather be in the brew of it all." He commented proudly. "Like the Axial Battalion." Harry narrowed his eyes.

"The military? I thought it was a war group." He felt somewhat embarrassed when the Being shook his head.

"The Battalion is a militia, yes, but there are other divisions. One tracks the use of Dark Forces, the other is purely for tactics." He looked directly at the attracted keeper. "One is a reserve, used mainly for large scale battles, and there are loads of scouts and paper pushers."

"And you'll be a paper pusher." Nikola cleverly teased, earning a scowl from the Paraffin prefect. Kaltag didn't bother her with an answer, only glaring at the mass of parchment he set away moments ago.

Hermione looked up when conversation abruptly ceased, tapping the feathery part of her quill to her bottom lip. "Well, I suppose an Auror would be a decent occupation," Harry lifted an eyebrow at her brusque comment, "but I imagine a Healer, or even a Goblin Liaison... or maybe working on experimental charms, potions and transfiguration....!" Ron threw Harry one of his less-than-amused looks; usually meaning Hermione would be on about this for a good while.

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It was Wednesday. Harry found himself in the library, pouring over books upon books for more information. So far, he found nothing. Madam Pince refused to hand over the schematics of Hogwarts, as she determined through an informal interrogation. He assumed his behavior was entirely too suspicious for her liking, and eased off before she could alert any of the professors to his motives. Harry sighed gruffly, holding his head up in a setback.

Voldemort would be here on Friday.

He didn't know how the serpentine wizard would get beyond the wards of the school, but he assumed the dark Celestials had a great deal to do with it. His scar hadn't prickled since his last vision. And even Hermione thought they did all they could do, and now relied on breaking into the Defense instructor's office to piece together the rest of the puzzle. Harry remained uncertain about this; Kenward reminded him too much of Lupin, and he had never broken into Lupin's office to solve his mysterious secret. But for some reason, part of himself was still wary of Kenward.

He was brought from his musings as a heavy set of books slammed on his table. Jerking up to meet his new guest, Harry caught Ginny's agitated look as she stacked her O.W.L. books beside one another. Raising an eyebrow at her erratic movements, Harry, quirked his jaw to the side. "Something the matter?"

She gave him a glare of blatancy, before beginning to shove her books in her bag. "Corner...cornered me today." Harry gave her a concerned look. "Nothing of the like, he just wanted to know when I had a free moment." At this, Harry cocked his head to the side.

"For what? Isn't he still with Cho?"

Ginny nodded, fumbling with her Herbology book. "Yes, he is, and I see no reason why he would be wondering as such, as he is with her." She clamped her bag shut and finally met Harry's eyes. "I would think he'd ask his own girlfriend for tips on how to do a spell properly. She is a year older than he is." Harry agreed, nodding musingly.

"Though her spellwork's been shoddy of late." Harry absently muttered. "Not concentrating hard on the task at hand." He crumpled his brows looking again at the fifth year. "But what would he want with you?" The young Weasley was at a loss for words, shaking her head dismissively.

"Don't think I'd fancy knowing." She hurriedly stood and swung her satchel over her shoulder. "Dinner should be now. Come on." Harry tiredly accepted, shutting the useless books on the table before joining Ginny toward the exit.

The two walked in companionable silence, Ginny with an amused grin and Harry with a tired frown. The noise level from the Great Hall several corridors down seemed fairly unnatural, with the din of pupils louder than normal. "What's niggling you?" Ginny's question was quiet and in light spirits, and Harry found it surprisingly calming.

"Oh...er," he began, wondering how to explain—without all the explaining—that he was concerned the school might be raided by Voldemort in a few days' time. "Just...something." Ginny gave him a peculiar look before turning the corner of her mouth upward.

"Something. Generalizes everything." She replied.

"I was wondering about the school's structure," he revealed, studying a dark wall. "How it's built, what's under it and all." The fifth year only nodded solemnly at his answer and stared ahead.



"Any particular reason why?" her bouncy, playful tone was replaced with one more somber and formal. Harry nearly stumbled when he realized what he replied with. Underground caves. The Chamber of Secrets. Tom Riddle possessing Ginny. Sighing gravely, Harry gave a sympathetic look to which she didn't receive.

"My apologies, Ginny. I—"

"It's all right." She genuinely responded with a brave façade. "It's been a good while, and I've come to terms, I suppose. Still a wound, but no longer fresh." He only nodded, hoping not to upset the young chaser anymore. "Besides, there are other places besides the Chamber under Hogwarts." Harry shot her look as they rounded the corner, nearing the raucous hall.

"Oh?"

The crimson-haired Gryffindor offered him a mischievous smile to which he gave her a confused gaze. "The Hollows," she mistily stated, her eyes glinting impishly. "Fred and George once told me there was a place deeper than the Chamber, so far under the school. Legend has it, that's where—"

"Oy, are you serious?"

"S'what I heard, I did..."

"You've not seen it, though?"

"Those two? Can't be..."

"No, no I haven't. But they told—"

"Could be 'im? Or her? Might even be you!"

"—Dunno, I'd bet my Galleons on Harry Potter, he is—"

"You're not believin' that load a codswallop, are yeh?"

"It's prophecy! We must believe!"

"—Blimey! The Child of Phoenix!"

"Could be one of us!"

"Still think it's Potter, though."

Harry and Ginny halted before the blast of noise hit them. He blanched when he overheard various snippets of what the conversations were about. "What's going on?" Ginny called out, not particularly to Harry. A stubby fourth year turned from her friend to look at the pair strangely.

"Have you not heard?" she inquired, with a haughty look. When the two shook their heads, the girl turned to her friend with a slight sneer. "A prophecy. A prophecy's been made." She turned without further words and pushed through the hall. Harry batted his eyes after the pair, his eyebrows creasing in a blend of worry, anger and shock. How had this come out?

"Prophecy?" Ginny queried, giving him a skeptical glance. "Are they sure?" Conversation only seemed to enhance as Harry drowned them out. Did the entire school know about that day in Divination? He was hopeful they had pulled it off for a while, but then again, Hogwarts students always did have a way of finding out such reserved things.

His first shifts of blame immediately went to the gossipy witches of Gryffindor, Lavender and Parvati. They had broken trust and betrayed Ella. Widening his eyes, Harry fought through the crowd toward Gryffindor table, with Ginny right on his heels. It took a while to work through the bodies and limbs of Celestials and wizards, a good number of which hovering around the Parador table.

Harry didn't have to get far to spot a forlorn Ella sitting near the end of the table, lazily spooning some rice. With careful scrutiny, he was somewhat relieved to notice no one was lingering around her or shouting questions at her. No, no. The students were milled around a familiar spot near the center of the table. Harry moved again through the crowd, with Ginny still trailing him silently.

It was there he found a disapproving Ron, along with a harassed looking Starbuck and an infuriated Kaltagonus. Lavender and Parvati, beaming smugly, were apparently recounting their tale, while the boys frowned upon them. "At least they haven't dragged Ella into this." Kaltag whispered in his ear. Harry, too, had to scowl

at the gossiping witches, retelling their tightly packed crowd in overly exaggerated details.

"...And the polar wind blew fiercely in the room! And all kinds of spirits and ghosts rose out of nowhere, right Lavender?" Parvati spookily told the eager crowd, smirking at their awed reactions.

"Ooh, yes," Lavender replied, her eyes wide with excitement. "And the candles flickered out, and it was so cold...very cold. And then it happened!" She grabbed her spoon and swung it wildly, nearly missing Neville's nose. The mass of students swayed back, gasping in unison. "Parvati spoke in this deep, dark voice..."

"Like the voice of You-Know-Who himself!" her partner added, nodding in confirmation. Dennis and Colin were wide-eyed and slack-jawed, with Colin clutching his camera protectively. Harry raised himself a bit higher to view the head table, only to find most of the professors missing. Shaking his head furiously, Harry turned away from the fibbing witches and headed for the exit. He was followed by the boys, and Ginny hung back to speak with the unimpressed Luna seated at the Ravenaire table. He noticed Terry Boot looked a bit roughed up, and he glowered in the direction of the storytelling duo as he passed.

With some difficulty, they made it out of the Great Hall, heading back toward the tower. Harry disregarded his grumbling stomach, knowing that he'd be sick with hearing the girls' tale for their own gain. "The nerve." Starbuck broke the stillness.

"Can anyone tell me how this happened exactly?"

"A few Hufflepuffs overheard the loudmouths in the loo. Ticking off who couldn't be the Child, you know. And the rest is history." Ron summarized in a disappointed pitch. Harry shook his head once more.

"Well, we've got bigger matters at hand. Voldemort'll be here in a few days." He needlessly reminded the sour-faced boys.

"Have you got the records, then? Of Hogwarts' blueprints?" Kaltag queried hopefully.

"Pince wouldn't hand them over." He disagreed.

"I knew we should've used Hermione instead." Ron sounded thoroughly unhappy their choice of library scout had failed. They waited at the base of the end of the floor for the next stairway to swing by before commencing.

"At any rate, Nikola's in choir practice," Starbuck enlightened. "So, we can't threaten Pince with brute strength."

"And Hermione's—" Ron trailed and broadened his eyes ahead. "There." The teenagers looked up to find the Gryffindor prefect descending the stairwell with a satisfied grin. She looked exceptionally pleased about something, as she only wore those self-satisfied smiles when she'd accomplished something especially important. Harry appraised her carefully.

"Must we ask?" Ron dubiously stated, walking beside his best friends to the tower. The Muggleborn threw him a meaningful look.

"You'll never guess where I've just been." Her statement had a taunting undertone to it, where Harry found himself somewhat dreading her answer. Ron delayed before asking, "where?"

Looking especially delighted, Hermione answered. "Kenward's."

"Please." Harry looked at her for some sort of rational explanation to her illogical behavior, and why she went there alone. Hermione led the way as they marched forward.

"Well, I went there really to ask a question about our last Defense class, and found the perfect opportunity." Both Harry and Ron gave each other a look before returning to hear the brown-eyed girl's story. "As we were in his office—quite cluttered, I was shocked to notice—he had to run down to the classroom to get a book for reference. Leaving his desk unattended." Harry whirled to look at the grinning witch, fighting a grin himself.

"You didn't."

"I definitely spotted some old files and parchment jutting out in one of his drawers, and all kinds of recent dates and entries in his day planner," she answered the unasked question before frowning. "No sword, but at least we know he's got enough to arouse suspicion.

Who really keeps parchment looking older than Hogwarts itself?" she asked the rhetorical inquiry. Shaking her head as if to answer her own question, Hermione eagerly settled on Harry. "Did Pince—?"

"No," he quickly answered, gripping his rucksack. "But I did find out that there is a place lower than the Chamber of Secrets itself." The Gryffindor prefects gradually faced him, giving him a haunted look. The last time he had been in Salazar Slytherin's hideaway, Hermione was Petrified and he and Ron were in second year, dragging the fraudulent Lockhart with them to rescue Ginny.

Ron's brown eyes reflected the discomfort churning within. "The Chamber?" he repeated. "D'you think it's in there?" With a preoccupied frown, Harry shrugged.

"Only Voldemort can get into the Chamber," he left off besides me, as to not frighten the listening Beings behind them. "But he gave no indication he was actually coming. If that's the case, then it couldn't be in the Chamber. And, we know he's coming for the weapons, so they can't be hidden there if he doesn't have them."

"And Dumbledore wouldn't be able to get in there anyway." Hermione pointed out, stepping ahead of the cluster of boys. They nodded firmly, each attempting to think of any other ways to get to the underground.

"It's called the Hollows," Harry informed, thinking over Ginny's words. "But if the only way to the Chamber is in Myrtle's bathroom, then there must be some place lower than the lavatory to get to the Hollows." Ron and Hermione seemed impressed and stunned to learn of the furtive caverns under the school.

"Well, Myrtle," Ron began uncertainly. "Or one of the ghosts must have seen it once or twice. You reckon we should ask?" There were murmurs of concord from the Beings and Hermione.

"There must be some way to get there, not just walking through walls, and all," Kaltag put in, fumbling with his chain. "And I'm sure Kenward knows it."

The dark-haired boy narrowed his eyes and looked to the mastermind of the plans. "So, when are we breaking in to Kenward's?" Hermione grimaced somewhat, and her eyebrows sank.

"You two've got Quidditch practice tomorrow," she reminded to their affirmed nods, "and those two have Sliatycx practice tonight." The Celestial brothers stirred before Starbuck muttered, "Oh, right," disappointedly. The seeker's green eyes widened behind his glasses and he stopped his tread.

"You mean we're doing this on Friday?" he hissed in disbelief. "We don't even know when they're coming Friday!"

"Not true," Hermione admonished quickly. "At night. Why else would he have mentioned the crescent moon?" Harry didn't take the time to acknowledge the witch's quick wit.

"That could be between seven and...the rest of the night!" he spluttered unsuitably. She calmly looked at him, smiling genially.

"I think you worry too much." Harry's face reddened, but he found he couldn't argue. Ron and the Paraffins subdued their snickers as Hermione continued walking with ease, a wide, knowing grin spread across her face.

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Lavender and Parvati continued milking their stay in the limelight, adding variations of their story that were sure to make Rita Skeeter flinch. Harry heard from Neville they told a group of third years that the apparition of Grindelwald appeared before them in the lavatory, warning them not to attend any classes for two months, for fear of Ministry intervention ahead. A few times Dean and Seamus entered the common room nearly in tears from laughing so hard; apparently, they had 'divined' to McGonagall that she would fall in love with Hagrid and...Harry blushed furiously when he heard the rest.

More and more as time wore on, Harry wondered if it was right to keep this information from Dumbledore. He was torn between telling him of the upcoming incursion, and controlling his own fortune. Though, he reluctantly admitted, Dumbledore could probably handle the situation a lot better than a group of sixteen and seventeen year old students. And, he mused, the Order would certainly come in

handy, but he was hesitant to let them—especially Sirius—know what they were planning.

Thursday passed rather speedily, as classes were a blur to the anxious Boy-Who-Lived. Hermione and the Smythes went around the castle while they were at Quidditch practice to round up the ghosts for any information. Unfortunately, none had ever heard of or seen the Hollow. Ron suggested the entrance may be out in the open as always, and proposed that they started tugging at all the suits of armor and paintings for any hidden mechanisms.

With dread, Harry realized today was the day. He sat inattentively in Greenhouse Six, obscuring Professors Sprout and Dianthe's lecture on the magical properties of enchanted snapdragons. It was his last class of the day, and afterward, he'd head to Gryffindor Tower to wait for Hermione to give the go ahead. The clever witch sat calmly across from him, unworried. She seemed to have an air as if nothing would happen to them, making Harry frown profoundly. Wasn't he supposed to be the reckless one? Perhaps the Department of Mysteries or this hectic year, that had loosened her firm mind somewhat.

Ron was plucking leaves off of his snapdragon, and crumbling them between his fingers. His red hair was more disheveled than average, and his eyes held a distant look. Starbuck and Nikola looked similar to Ron, whereas Kaltag took after Hermione. He nonchalantly willed buds to bloom on his plant, his emerald eyes focusing disinterestedly. A bit miffed at the Celestial's mood, Harry stared at his lilac plant and huffed quietly to himself. A lone bud burst open as if to convey his mood.

He started when the room came to life, and students were shrugging off their work cloaks and pulling off their gloves. Ron seemed to be the first one ready, and he nervously waited for the others to arrange themselves. While tugging off the battered sleeve, Harry paused to watch his classmates exit. They were talking excitedly and carelessly; none seemed to be concerned with their lives at the present time. Stiffening his lips, Harry surveyed the exiting teenagers with displeasure. If they only knew....

"Let's off." Hermione instructed. Harry quickly threw off his cloak and negligently tossed it on the table. The trek back toward the main institution was taciturn. Harry idly wondered what would happen

once the time came. He knew his Invisibility Cloak would be in good use, but it surely couldn't fit six people under it. And his Marauder's Map was still locked in his trunk in the dormitory. Ron heaved an onerous sigh as they climbed the steps. The six only made it into the entrance hall before Harry heard an aged voice beckon.

"Harry." He was alarmed to hear Dumbledore address him. The wizened wizard ambled toward the group in robes of royal violet, sprinkled with small stars. Harry studied his garments before he caught the twinkling blue eyes of Headmaster Dumbledore. "A word, if you will." His throat was sudden constricted, and his mouth dry as parchment. Pulling off an anxious grin, Harry ran a hand through his untidy fringe and absentmindedly stroked his scar.

"Sir," his voice wavered just a bit. Dumbledore acknowledged the five Paradors, and Harry watched distantly as they drew away from him and the headmaster. He really needed to call them on their recent and nasty habit of abandoning him.

"I trust you are doing well, Mr. Potter?" His tone was formal, but jovial, and Harry merely chuckled nervously.

"Well, sir. Well."

Dumbledore nodded, rubbing his small finger in fixation. "How are the Defense Associations progressing?" Harry inhaled deeply, biting his lips.

"All right. Good, I'd say." The old man nodded with a proud smile. Dumbledore's eyes pierced Harry's green orbs, as if searching for his restlessness. He expectantly looked at the student, who was wriggling his nose and fidgeting a bit, but grinned nonetheless.

"As can be expected." With one last beam, Grindelwald's victor patted the Gryffindor on the shoulder, and moved to exit the castle. "Must be on my way. I wanted a word with Hagrid before he went into the forest. Good day, Mr. Potter." Harry mumbled something in departure to the wise professor, nearly sighing in relief as they parted ways. He was four steps away from freedom before, "And, Harry?"

The boy paused, closing his eyes to keep insouciance before facing the old Transfiguration instructor. "Sir?" He was studied a bit more



under the elderly scrutiny, before Dumbledore looped a finger in his white mane.

"Was there anything you wanted to inquire of me?" he questioned, the twinkle in his eyes somewhat dimmed. "To tell me, my boy?" Harry gulped. Perhaps he wasn't as free as he'd hoped. Dumbledore awaited an answer, and Harry debated whether he should tell him, or let the old man go on without a clue. The latter could cause serious consequences for him and the others later, and in other words, tonight. Furrowing his brows, Harry slowly shook his head.

"Not at the moment, sir." He stated in a diplomatic tone. "Good day, sir." As he walked toward the tower, Harry swore the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes nearly diminished into disappointment, but the bright-orbed teenager had other things to be concerned with.

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Harry tucked his father's cloak in his back pocket, as Ron stood by and watched Hermione recite spell after door-unlocking spell. "Maybe it's something he hasn't taught us yet." Ron quipped, looking behind them cautiously. "Maybe you just don't know it." He grinned excitedly. He was effectively shut up when the door swung open. Harry glanced out the nearby window, watching bluish-purple skies bleed over the grounds with darkness. They wouldn't have much time in here before the dark groups arrived to incite trouble.

"Come on," Hermione whispered, opening the door wider to step in. "We don't know how long they can keep Kenward from coming back here." Ron quickly followed as Harry brought up the rear. Starbuck and Nikola were busy distracting Kenward some several corridors and floors away. Kaltag was to tag him from a distance after his siblings had done their part.

The Defense room was considerably dark, with only a very low candle on Kenward's front desk to illuminate the area. The three simultaneously lit their wands, and Harry narrowly avoided crashing into a desk. Tiptoeing stealthily through the aisles, Hermione guided the boys around desk after desk. Harry had to suddenly halt when Ron bent over to pocket an abandoned quill. "Hm, more for me, then."

Hermione glanced around quickly before she slinked up the staircase to the partly open office entrance, with both boys following close behind. Muttering the counter spell to put out her wand light, Hermione was directed by the seeker and keeper's wand lights, and muttered an Incendiary Charm to light the torches in the office.

Kenward's office was emptier and void of the cutesy articles Umbridge had decorated with last year. It basically consisted of his near cluttered desk, and two soft seats for visitors, with an old trunk in the corner, a battered dossier cabinet, and the blackened hearth. Ron ambled over to the fireplace, hesitantly placing his hand over the blackened embers. Drawing his hand back, he flicked at the soot before wiping it in his robes. "Still warm. Must've contacted someone before we were here."

Hermione tucked her wand at her side and advanced to Kenward's desk. Her hand nearly grabbed the knob before she hesitated, looking at each boy in turn. Harry thinned his eyes as Hermione bit her lower lip in reconsideration. "Are we sure we want to do this?" The scoff Ron issued was nothing less than theatrical. He threw his long arms in the air and brought them down in incredulity.

"Now you want to back out when we're already here?" he accused, grumbling to himself. Hermione's eyes glittered before she yanked open the first compartment. Harry observed as she sifted through the drawer, determining nothing of importance. She pulled out the next; digging through it like a mole would a burrow. When she glanced up at them, Harry was startled to find annoyance.

"Don't just stand there like lumps, help me search!" The boys sprang into action, Harry tugging open a drawer full of inkbottles, and Ron moving to the breakfront.

"What exactly is it we're looking for, then?" He queried, opening a chest full of neatly stacked parchment. Hermione plopped a pile of formal scrolls back into the desk before jerking another one open.

"You'll know when you've found it." The witch answered. Harry hardly believed he'd know what to find if he didn't know what it was. The sky was now entirely dark, with few stars strewn sparingly across the firmament. Renewing his speed, Harry moved on to the next drawer. Ron was busily sorting through whatever documents the cabinet held when they heard it.

Footsteps running up the stairs.

The trio froze, looking at each other in fright. Hermione looked to be trembling in fear; Ron's face expressed a pained look. Harry swallowed thickly and hastily shut his drawer without a sound. Their eyes were glued to the slightly ajar door. There was a flash of gold before the door was pushed open.

"You found anything yet?" Nikola asked, with Starbuck jumping in behind her from the landing. They quickly closed the door as Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Hermione shakily tucked a thicket of hair behind her ear before continuing her rummage. "Kenward seemed a bit fidgety and worried when we approached him. Don't think he knows anything."

"Kaltag's trailing him, so he should be able to warn us or thwart him if he comes too close." His blond twin brother explained, gliding over to help Ron. Nikola split her time between assisting Hermione and Harry with the instructor's desk.

"Never thought I'd say this," Nikola frowned, flitting through a book, "but this would've been much easier if Dufresne were here to influence him." Harry scowled at the fresh memory of the girls tricking him, and shoved the papers rudely out of the way.

They went on pilfering through their professor's private things, every so often checking with one another for progress. Hermione seemed quite frantic and upset as she searched drawer after drawer. "I don't understand," she began as if someone had proved her wrong. "I saw the parchments coming out of this drawer. And I've seen no hide nor hair of Luna's drawing." Ron was absently picking at a few crinkled parchments, setting them aside as he examined each.

"Kenward's more mental than we thought," he stated indolently, narrowing his brown orbs at a thin, weathered, leather-bound book. "Writing all these spells and how 'his people' are suffering." He turned the book on its side to analyze something further. Harry studied his best friend in befuddlement. "Got a thing for necklaces, too. Drew his in here over a dozen times."

"Ron, if you're not going to search seriously—" Hermione began with a cautionary tone.

"No, but he's got this weird one, too. Dunno what it is about them. Could be important. Plus, he's got a great stack of these in the bottom drawer." He furrowed his brows and looked behind him. Harry opened his mouth to reprimand Ron for wasting time, as the crescent moon had just bared itself from behind the clouds.

"Ron, what did you say?" Hermione intently looked up, holding his gaze critically. The flame-haired Weasley held up a tattered book.

"Got a drawer full of them, he does. And he's going on...about..." his words trailed as the prefect went a bit red in the face. "Oh...bloody. I've found the thing, haven't I?" Hermione slammed the desk shut and jetted over to Ron: from Harry's standpoint, it appeared she was barely restraining herself to burst forth and hug the Weasley. Instead, she snatched the booklet from Ron's hand and peeked at the gathering pile behind him.

"Yes, you're brilliant!" she extolled, thumbing through the book. Ron was bashfully rouge as the others moved to surround the bright witch.

"Brilliant and all, Hermione, but what's he found?" Harry interjected, craning his neck over Ron's shoulder. The bushy brown-haired girl smiled widely, whirling around to meet his verdant gaze.

"The key to finding both the Sword and the Scepter." She revealed, flitting through a few more tomes before pulling out a creased and folded fallow parchment. "I knew there was something more to Kenward."

"Besides the fact he may be a Death Eater?" Ron pointed out rather stiffly.

"It all makes sense now, why he's here, and why he's got the Sword of Amenophus." She imprecisely preached, unraveling the document. When she showed it to the room at large, Harry's eyed broadened to the size of saucers.

The paper, though very wrinkled and in bad shape, depicted an elegant drawing of a silver edged sword, complete with a golden hilt, adorned in rectangular canary gems and something resembling cuneiform carvings. It was the Sword of Amenophus. "Luna was

right." He could only find the voice to say. "He's got the sword. And he's handing it over to Voldemort tonight."

"No," Hermione broke in before Harry could continue. "No, he isn't Harry. That's what I thought, too." He looked at her as if she had just sprouted an arm from her head.

"What are you talking about?" Ron picked up, crossing his arms. "You're saying you don't think he's a Death Eater?" The Gryffindor nodded firmly, flipping hastily through the journal.

"I thought he was, until you found these, Ron." She resumed her mad flipping. "The journals." At this, the boy with unkempt black hair fell bewildered.

"What journals, Hermione? Ron said it himself, the man's nutters. What type of sane person would refer to students as his people? Unless he was referring to the Death Eaters?" Starbuck, Ron and Nikola all agreed, seeking Hermione's rebuttal. It seemed she finally stumbled upon what she was seeking. With a triumphant grin, she faced her friends and held the journal in the torchlight for them to read.

"These journal's aren't written by Kenward." She spoke as Harry leaned closer to look at what the words on the page read. He had to squint several times and make out the words before he realized why he couldn't read it.

"It's in Greek." Nikola divulged, looking at the book with interest. "Although ancient, yes, but it's Greek." Harry quirked his head to the side.

"So he's a Greek Death Eater." Hermione huffed in frustration and indicated to the letters and dates scrawled untidily at the top.

"They're from one of his ancestors." She disclosed. "Do you see that date and those letters? A.Y. 1072."

The numbers rang a bell to Harry, and he trudged through his mind to figure their meaning. And A.Y. Hadn't he just read about something in the year 1070? It couldn't have been a Goblin Rebellion. It certainly wasn't a potions discovery or new charm invented. He bit his lips in deep contemplation. What did any of this

have to do with Kenward or the Sword? It wasn't as if Kenward was born in 1072.

As if the Hogwarts Express tackled him, he figured it out.

"He's...he..." Hermione nodded knowingly.

"Kenward is the true heir of Areus Youngblood."

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A/N: Revised chapter. All right. I deserve it. It's been MONTHS. And I've no excuse, because I have no life. Well, I do actually, but I'm trying to ignore it.... Chapter title is a bit personal, but I'll just say it now, if you've seen it before, I don't own it.

Chapter Nineteen Preview:

- 1). The plot thickens.
- 2). Will they be caught?
- 3). Will they find the Hollows in time?

## Chapter Nineteen: The Ravenstone Scepter

Quite unsurprisingly, a stunned silence met Hermione's revelation. Of all the things Harry had expected to be revealed in that office tonight, this certainly wasn't what he anticipated. Kenward—the heir of Youngblood? From what he could scrounge together, it simply did not make sense. For one, Kenward was most assuredly a Death Eater.

"No," Starbuck broke the stint in a tone of blatant disbelief. "Kenward can't be Youngblood's heir." Hermione's sharp eyes swerved over to the Celestial. Crossing his arms somewhat defiantly, Starbuck slowly shook his head, as if rebuking a child. "He just can't." The brown-haired witch threw him a challenging look, edged with a questioning glance. Harry's eyes traveled to her hand, her knuckles alabaster from gripping the shabby chronicle roughly, almost to the point of damaging it.

"And why?" She confronted the Being, holding the log to eye level. "You've your proof in here. He's Youngblood's rightful heir."

"And how do you know that?" Ron tossed in, perplexity lacing his curious inquiry. Hermione looked quite irked that even Ron questioned her affirmation, and she rounded on him.

Tapping the inscription of 'A.Y. 1072' at the top of the fallow parchment impatiently, she huffed, "Because only the blood successor of Youngblood would be in possession of these journals. We read it ourselves a few weeks ago." Her brows had knit themselves together as she tried to sway the disbelieving set.

Quirking her blonde head to the side and crossing her arms, Nikola shifted her weight to one leg as she studied the bothered witch. "You're saying he isn't a Death Eater, and that he's got the Sword of Amenophus for our side?" As a slightly relieved Hermione nodded, glad to reach one person, Ron added, "But how do you know that?"

With an altogether unwomanly grunt of anger, Hermione spun on her heel to slam the ragged diary on the defense instructor's cluttered desk. The Paradors flinched at the clever witch's frustration and anger, clearly evident on her face as she twisted around in ire, staring them down with fierce, russet eyes. "Because he's got the journals, Ronald." She forced through clenched teeth. Ron looked

thoroughly disciplined as his cheeks glowed from humiliation in the sparse light.

Harry tilted his head somewhat, and narrowed his eyes at the exasperated prefect. "Well, what makes you think he didn't just nick them from the real heir?" His gaze met Hermione's infuriated one as her cheeks slowly tinged a bluish-rose hue in the moonlight. Inwardly, Harry knew the possibility could happen. It certainly did not take much to impersonate anyone these days. Lest they overlook the Mad-Eye Moody quandary: It wasn't more than two years ago, he had been attacked and mimicked by Barty Crouch, Jr. for barely a year.

Starbuck expanded on Harry's proposal as Nikola anxiously moved forward to study the log on the writing desk. "Yeah, for all we know, he could have attacked the real heir—or worse, killed them—to take the journals." Harry swore Hermione's lips thinned more than McGonagall's. "Otherwise, why would he hide them in here, and not somewhere safer? His chambers, perhaps?"

"Or even with Dumbledore?" Harry promptly added. He felt an unpleasant gnawing within, at having excluded the headmaster on their plans. In fact, his scar barely tingled at the reminiscence. The Muggleborn actually seemed to swiftly consider their notions before her expression softened somewhat.

"Considering it is his work area, he'd probably want them readily accessible for quick reference." She replied as Nikola made noises of interest while flipping through the pages. "The first place one would assume to inspect is his private quarters, because no one would think to put books of such value in an office." Harry would have argued with her that the office would have been the first place he'd have looked anyway, but the ruby-haired keeper chose then to highlight another contentious topic of interest.

"All good and well, Hermione," he began, stooping quickly to pull out dozens of journals, "but he's still a Death Eater."

"I thought we'd established that he wasn't." Nikola chimed in with a tone of controlled tedium.

"I'm not convinced." Ron shot back, his orbs glittering with dissent.



"I'm with Ron." Starbuck immediately declared after. Harry mutely agreed, tightening his arms athwart his chest in expectancy. Sealing her eyelids shut with a pointed sigh, Hermione propped herself against the edge of the aged hand-carved desk, pressing her fingers to her temples.

"This is going to be a long night."

With a related huff beside her, Nikola shook her head and briefly glanced at the three young men. "Boys." Murmured the Entity. Gesturing in annoyance at the tiny, illuminated window, Harry glared at the girls.

"We haven't all night!" The messy-locked wizard pointlessly barked. "Kenward could be handing over the Sword to Voldemort as you two blather on!" He felt the familiar warmth growing within him, and for once, he was glad Kenward had a right mind to keep plants out of his office. No doubt everyone would be bound by twisting branches and vines if he'd lost control. Hermione met Harry's eyes with the recognizable anger that she had let loose on him when he hadn't apologized properly, and the seeker took this as a sign to gather himself considerably.

"All right," she began touchily, lurching forward to grab an askew diary from the stack in Ron's arms. Holding it up as if showing something particularly commonplace, she squinted at each wizard and Being hard. "Kenward wouldn't have these if he were working for Voldemort." Ron balked suddenly, causing the stack of journals to wobble and tumble out of his arms. "They wouldn't have needed all of these journals to find the weapons. Just the ones they truly have purpose for."

"When did we start thinking like Death Eaters?" Ron spoke, though Harry suspected the crimson-haired prefect wanted to substitute the 'we' and address it to Hermione as 'you'.

The bushy, brown-haired witch stood steadily, meeting his gaze to reply gravely, "If we want to win, we've no choice but to think alike." Ron did not respond, and Harry thought it incredibly smart for him to remain quiet. Fixing her stare at the trio of males, she nodded once to Starbuck. "Youngblood lived in Greece. Odds are the journals are written so. Start translating. When you find something important, let us know."

She turned around without another word, looking over Nikola's shoulder. "Goodness," the young Entity started, her eyes widening a fraction. "This is worse than your chicken scrawl, Star." With a grunt, the Being turned his back to his sister. Harry swallowed thickly, exhaling calmly before facing the wavy-haired Celestial. Ron wordlessly handed the Being a shabby journal, which he took with a slight pause, before thumbing through the book. Athena's youngest son dragged his eyes over the tiny, scrawled writings of Areus Youngblood. The words, packed so tightly on the page, had the unfortunate effect of making Harry's scar tingle.

Harry could make out eccentric symbols racing across the page, forming some type of unconventional tongue only Starbuck could comprehend. The Gryffindor keeper towered over the two boys, so contrary in appearance, as he attempted to read over their shoulders.

"These markings," Starbuck whispered to his companions, his tone one of bafflement. "They're of the Byzantine dialect. Used in Greece between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. Nothing like the Demotic we use today."

"He was around during the eleventh century," Harry reminded, squinting at a triangular symbol. Starbuck didn't respond, and resumed his perusal. Behind the trio of boys, Hermione and Nikola were whispering intensely, hovering over one of the diaries.

"Youngblood's father was of Egyptian lineage. It explains the influence of designations for the weaponry." Nikola announced, twisting around lithely to grab another chronicle. Harry pursed his lips and crouched down to lift a log from the flagged-stone floor. Ron caught his movement and frowned.

"What are you doing?"

Harry frowned lightly. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Unless you're suddenly fluent in the Ancient Greek language, you can't read his journals." The redhead stiffly retorted. Scowling softly, Harry inserted his index finger between the pages.

"I only want to see if there are any more images in his journals. They might hold clues." The bothered seeker responded. Harry thumbed slowly through the book as Ron hummed in uncertainty.

"Um, yeah." The crimson-haired prefect answered in a tone of reluctant consideration. "Mind you, once we find out if the weapons are here, there's still the matter of getting...there." Harry glanced upward toward the keeper from a thoroughly Greek, sallow entry to furl his brows. Ron glanced anxiously to the pile of logs at his feet. "I mean, we don't know where the Hollows are, exactly."

Pulling his bottom lip between his teeth, Harry worried them gently in deliberation, mildly cursing Ron inwardly for being right. Once again, his recklessness had left him without a full plan. By the time they'd pulled all the statues' limbs, broken curses on them, tickled portraits and run the mill of the castle, the Death Eaters would have the weapons by then.

He noted Ron shifted rather uncomfortably at his lack of response, and Harry truly did not know how to answer. "Don't worry, Ron, I'd thought we'd wing it," did not seem like an appropriate enough answer. It would create more fears and doubts rather than alleviate them.

"But how are the Death Eaters getting in, then?" The blonde Being queried, glancing up from a withering chronicle. "Surely Hogwarts has wards to alert them to that sort of event." Harry's eyes caught the falcate moon leering at him at the summit of the night sky. Harry could only think of one way they could try to get in unnoticed. And one person that would tell them.

"Wormtail," he hissed, absently crushing the journal in his fists. At the Celestials' baffled expressions, he tightened his jaw. "A traitor who joined their ranks. He knew of every secret passage into, out of, and around Hogwarts." He explained in a quiet tone, brimming with bitterness. "And to please Voldemort, he'd tell all he knew." Ron looked at Harry with concern, as did Hermione, but the untidy-haired teenager locked his jaw tightly and dropped his hard gaze to the crushed log in his fists.

If he came across Pettigrew tonight, he'd make him pay dearly.

Selling secrets to their darkest enemy for his personal gain, selling his soul to be Voldemort's doormat, causing the death of his so-called 'friends' . . . . All for power. Harry bit back a grunt of disgust, nearly ripping open Youngblood's diary in fury. A lot of things in his life would be better if Pettigrew simply hadn't been born. He'd have his parents, for one, and Sirius and Remus would have been happy, each, perhaps, with families of their own. But he'd never know.

The heat from within was churning once more, and Harry forced himself to calm down. An icy wind howled beyond the window, signaling his lack of restraint. He truly needed to calm himself before something unpleasant happened.

"Hello, hello," Nikola interrupted his concentration with her sagely triumphant tone. The students all turned from their investigating to the Entity expectantly, as she smirked down at the battered open journal. "...I cannot bear these armaments daily as they are; thus created I crystals of quartz to warn myself of impending danger, coinciding with the weapons." She grinned victoriously at the quartet, the chronicle in hand. "Youngblood seems to have created crystals linked to the weapons. Anyone wanna wager Kenward's got his slimy hands on them?" A sharp look was directed at Nikola as Hermione pulled another journal into her hands.

"Kenward isn't slimy." She corrected, her head cracking in the directions of the young men to add crossly, "and he isn't a Death Eater, either."

"Any images of the crystals?" Harry questioned, picking up another journal also. "Powers, abilities, anything?" Her blonde hair fell over her eyes as she scanned the entry again, flipping through a few more pages. Dejectedly, she shook her head at Harry.

"Nothing. They just seem to warn him, is all. Correspond with their current hue, or something or other...and if lost, the weapons can lead the wearer to the crystals and vice versa. Crystals tell the state of being of the weapons through color: life force of the wearer, safety, warning, and all that." Her attention fell back to the log. She hummed in interest a few seconds later, drawing their attentions back. "Apparently, the weapons can also locate each other with a single thought, after both have been activated by incantations." Leaning against the desk with her inquisitive orbs glued to the journal, Nikola did not speak again.

Starbuck stared at his twin sister for a solid minute before narrowing his eyes and hissing, "Well, does it say what the incantation is?"

Without breaking her sight from the journal, Nikola retorted. "Now, if it did, don't you think I'd've already told you?" Biting back an angry rejoinder, Starbuck instead wrenched open the log and returned to his read-through. It was another five minutes of useless searching as the five randomly flipped through the estimated pile of thirty journals for any depictions. Harry tossed log after log to the side as the only two people who understood the chronicle's writings read as quickly as they could. Sighs of frustration could be heard from both his best friends, Hermione for not finding any useful information, and Ron for wasting their time.

"Could be finishing my Transfiguration essay right about now..." he murmured, flinging a book at the thick window. It impacted with a loud thud, stilling all the office's invaders.

"Since when do you do your homework early?" Nikola mused, slamming a journal shut and picking up another. Huffing to herself after reading the first lines, she snorted derisively, "Oh, great. I've got the puberty journal."

Harry continued to sort through the pile, anxiously leafing through the diaries, trying to spot any illustrations. Just as he dropped another all-scrawled tome, his scar tingled something fierce. Slapping a warm palm against the stinging heat, Harry surveyed his working friends through his round spectacles. With an anxious sigh, he raised another book from the pile. Either the Death Eaters were getting close, or Voldemort was divvying out orders.

The noise of ruffling parchment brought him back to his senses as the group of Paradors scoured the logs for anything they could grasp. "If only we'd tackled Greek in Ancient Runes," Hermione breathed in irritation. "This could have gone a lot quicker."

"I'll say," Ron added, frowning at her. "Then I wouldn't feel so useless." Harry pursed his lips and peeked out the window once more. The crescent moon was higher in the sky. They couldn't have been there that long, could they? Suddenly, it all began to seem very strange to him. Wouldn't Kenward have come back to his office by now? Teachers usually did so after the final meal, and it was

nearing thirty minutes past eight. And Kaltag: Hopefully, he wasn't in any kind of trouble yet.

The prickle in his scar didn't dim, but remained somewhat dull and very present. It was a constant reminder of what was to happen tonight. More than ever, Harry was starting to doubt his decision to leave Dumbledore in the cold and seize his destiny. The headmaster did have a right to know what was going on; it was his school, in every way, and he had an obligation to protect it at all costs. The dark-haired boy felt somewhat guilty for leading the man blindly into battle. Then again, the man did keep his fair share of secrets, which Harry was rightfully obliged to know of. The green-eyed teenager stared intensely past the journal in his hands to reflect on what other secrets Dumbledore might've kept from him. He trusted the wizened headmaster too much, and it dearly cost him the lives of others. Though Dumbledore may have given him his word that he'd no more skeletons in the cupboard to divulge, Harry could not bring himself to fall for another of his lies. And the biggest lie of all, he was simply trying to unravel at this moment.

Was Kenward the Child of Phoenix? Or was this another of Dumbledore's clandestine bombshells to release? Wiping at his prickly blemish, Harry did not care what occurred tonight; his only goal was to reveal Kenward as the Child of Phoenix.

Shaking himself from his furtive thoughts, Harry tuned into Starbuck, voicing his latest discovery. "...Did he write it? Did he write down the prophecy?" Hermione queried, staring at the chronicle in the Being's hand with eager, brown eyes. Shaking his head negatively, the wavy-haired fenzer traced a line in the book with his finger. Harry strode over to the two with determination, his brows lowered.

"No, no prophecy, but Youngblood's stated that he doesn't remember having written the prophecy." He declared, wrinkling his eyebrows at the entry.

Ron curved from idly flipping parchment in his shabby burgundy journal. "What, you mean like he had some sort of fit or something?" he inquired, looking to the flaxen-haired Celestial for answers. Nodding with tightened jowls, Starbuck scanned the account once more.

"Last thing he remembers was writing some proposal and coming to a few minutes later with this prediction on parchment. Didn't remember a thing." He summarized. Shaking his head as he flicked back and forth through the two pages Starbuck quirked his mouth to the side. "But he does say the Child is innocent and pure, the rest is too garbled to read. And he keeps on writing something about 'gold blood,' and I can't make out the rest."

At this, Harry tilted his head to the side, absorbing the information. The seeker's brows wrinkled in thought as he processed what was revealed. "Gold blood?" he mumbled, glancing around the room for an answer. Would the Child of Phoenix have gold blood? Was that a distinctive trait? "Wait a minute—so, you're saying Kenward will bleed gold blood?" The others threw him a look from their various stages of probing.

"What," Ron started with a skeptical expression, gripping his journal open. "First he's a Death Eater, now he's light's greatest warrior? What next, he just happens to be the next Minister for Magic with a homicidal complex?" Nikola hopped off Kenward's desk to read over the log in Starbuck's possession. Squinting her eyes at the entry, she mouthed the dialect to herself as the Gryffindors awaited her findings.

Licking her lips in thought she blew a lock of hair from her face before gazing over at the trio of impatient wizards. "Going to be harder than we thought." She declared in a miserable tone. When Harry and the Gryffindor prefects exchanged baffled glances, she elaborated. "According to Youngblood, the Child of Phoenix does not know who they are until their destiny is revealed at the appropriate time."

Harry's jaw was slack. "You're saying anyone can be the Child now?" Hermione's words were more of a statement as she broke the silence. Reluctantly, Nikola nodded. Knitting her brows together, Hermione gave short glances to her companions. "And, anyone of us, and the entire school...maybe even the entire wizarding world, could be the Child?"

"Apparently."

"Hmph. That's only, what—?" Ron waved his hand clasping the journal in the air. "Hundreds of thousands of more people to

investigate!" Sighing heavily, Ron plopped down in the visitor's chair to rub his face with his hand, and stared at the journal tiredly.

"Innocent and pure?" Ron asked, his face already deciphering the new information. "Well that narrows it down considerably. That rules out Slytherin, Aves, and all of Ginny's former boyfriends."

"Ron . . . ." Hermione began with intent.

"...And a few Ravenclaws. Dunno how some of them managed to narrowly miss getting in Slytherin." Conceding defeat with his unresolved façade, Ron returned to his journal.

Hermione gave her partner a disapproving glare before returning her gaze to the Celestials, then the pile of books. "Come on. We'll figure that out later. Right now, we've got to concern ourselves with keeping Voldemort from getting these weapons." Harry hesitantly agreed, keeping his mind on what they had just learned. Everyone in the wizarding world was now a candidate for the Child of Phoenix. Part of him lessened in his belief that Kenward was undoubtedly the Child, but most of his mind stubbornly kept with that belief. One way or another, he was going to get Kenward to bleed tonight, even if he had to cut the professor himself. Then this whole nightmare would be over.

They had no sooner started to rummage through the heap of journals when they heard the classroom door slam once more. The quintet stood frozen in their professor's office, all wide-eyed and their hearts thumping against their sternums. Harry's eyes lingered on the closed door, the itchiness in his scar bothering him like mad, but he did not lift a finger to relieve it. Muffled footsteps could be heard moving through the classroom, and stools could be heard scraping the stone floor.

'No,' Harry inwardly pleaded as his scar stung viciously. 'Not now, not yet.' The steps drew closer and more frantic. With a quick, silent eye-to-eye conversation with the others in the room, Harry slipped out his wand for protection, and the others followed his lead. A few paces away, Ron stood abruptly and stifled a whimper, pulling out his wand with a shaky hand. For the second time that evening, the door was thrown open and Harry's eyes were fixated on the blur of crimson and cobalt, his wand steady.



Kaltag exhaled roughly and leaned on the back of the door to close it, leaving it slightly ajar. His wide eyes surveyed the room for a brief moment before a grin trailed a relieved sigh. "You would not believe the stuff I went through to get here!" He passionately began whilst the startled assembly sighed in relief, stowing their wands away. Nikola simply rolled her eyes at the top prefect of Paraffin, turning her attention back to Youngblood's journal. Ruffling his unnaturally unruly hair, Kaltag stepped forward purposefully. "Would you believe I was dangling off one of the staircases?"

"No." Was Nikola's toneless, unenthused response.

Lowering his brows Kaltag gestured dismissively with his hands. "All right, I'll skip that, then—"

"Where's Kenward?" Ron breathed in query, bending to seize more logs. Harry noticed the usually ruddy Weasley seemed to lose his color while they were anticipating Kaltag's arrival. Moving forward to inspect the journals in the Gryffindor's hands, the blue-eyed Being exhaled sharply.

"Left him up in the Astronomy Tower five minutes ago. He was just standing there for a good ten minutes." He shrugged, taking a journal for himself. "Thought he'd be fine by himself." Hermione broke from rapidly thumbing through pages.

"The Astronomy Tower?" she repeated, her brows hanging low over her troubled eyes. The eldest Smythe son nodded once. Harry had just started to thumb through his book before Starbuck spoke up.

"How'd you get here so fast?" With a raised eyebrow at his youngest sibling, Kaltag replied derisively.

"I'm determined." Harry shook his head to focus on more important matters. The prickles had dulled slightly, but his mark still tingled as a reminder. "Ran into the Aves on my way up. They didn't see me, though." The ginger-haired Celestial resumed his account. "They were patrolling an hour early this evening. They must be up to something. Surely they know what's to happen tonight."

"I'll bet. If anyone's a spy, it's Malfoy and his Death Eaters in training." Ron furthered, scoffing in disgust. Kaltag grinned more to himself than to Ron's comment and crossed his arms.

"Timed it just right." He went on with a fanciful smirk. "They walked right past the drooping torches and — poof!" He released a mischievous snort. "They'll be arguing for flame retardant robes next year."

"Heh." Ron subdued his snickers under Hermione's censorious glower. When the witch's eyes went back to scanning her task, Kaltag's own thrown orbs studied the tome in his hands.

"So...what are we doing?" he inquired, flipping the chronicle over to study the back.

"Oh, that's right; you were busy setting people on fire." Nikola mordantly stated, ignoring her brother's frown. "Well, Kenward's is the heir of Areus Youngblood — you remember him, the weapons bloke — and he's inherited his missing journals, and Youngblood doesn't recall having made the Child of Phoenix prophecy."

Harry took in Kaltag's stunned countenance. Throwing Harry a fleeting look, Kaltag furrowed his brows. "I thought Kenward—?"

"No, he isn't a Death Eater." Hermione jadedly cut in.

"But some of us still think he swiped the journals from the real heir." Ron emphasized, his accusing gaze squarely on the disregarding Hermione.

"And the weapons are linked to some kind of crystal," Harry threw in, shaking his head to show he was still bemused. "They can locate it and all, but Kenward must have it in his quarters somewhere." Kaltag finally opened his journal and stared at the withering pages for a couple of seconds.

"And the journals are in Greek. Youngblood was a native of Thessaloniki. Makes sense." He shook his head to himself, skimming through the log.

Harry's eyes doggedly glanced through the unfamiliar writings of Youngblood; one symbol appeared to meld into the next after glancing over so many of them. His break came when he turned over the next parchment and was rewarded with a drawing. Age hadn't been kind to the sallow parchment, wrinkled and breaking

apart at the top edges; the bottom and sides had been especially smooth, unlike the rest of the entries.

"So, Kenward has the sword." Ron began after a silent moment. Harry tried to flip to the next page, but found a bothersome thickness of parchment preventing it. "But a great shining sword, how's he carrying it around if he can't be seen with it?" Narrowing his eyes at the thick parchment, Harry tried again to turn to the next sheet, but couldn't.

"I don't know." He heard Hermione reply. "Maybe he's used a Shrinking Charm to carry it around easier. From Luna's description, it must be quite large." Fumbling his fingers over the parchment, Harry furrowed his brows at the difficult paper. Why wouldn't the page turn? On his third try, Harry's scar prickled again with stern pinpricks of pain. Upon his wince, azure eyes darted in his direction.

"Harry?" Concern raveled Kaltag's voice as Harry vigorously rubbed against his famous blemish. The pain subsided somewhat, and he opened his eyes he hadn't realized he closed.

"I...I think they're close," he announced to the silent room. With a coarse chafe, he looked at the impatient sixth years. "Very close." No one wasted time with continuing their readings. The Being of the Elements' eyes lingered on Harry for but a moment longer, before he, too, continued translating. Alas, no longer the center of attention, Harry's eyes fell on the bulky parchment nuisance.

"Still," Ron resumed, his brows creased in deliberation. "Someone else must have seen the sword. And if it's out there, the scepter."

"It's a bit late to ask the students if they've seen anything, I'd think," Kaltag chimed in. "Plus, when are they ever concerned about something other than hearsay?"

Harry flipped the thick parchment in aggravation. It was still clumped together. "Well, we've turned this office top to end, and it isn't here. So he must have it on him." The only present Weasley pressed. "Wearing it, maybe." His thumb caught between the parchment and Harry cocked his head to the side. Pressing his thumb downward, the ripened papers tugged free from the binding and he blinked. Jerking the blank paper from betwixt the entries, Harry let the journal fall to his feet and inspected the fused parchment. His thumb was

still caught in the midst of the papers; shifting it to the side, the parchment doubled in width as it fell open. He could have thrummed his head against the wall.

He had fought angrily with the parchment for all this time without realizing that it was folded. Quietly berating himself, Harry unfolded the rectangle into a much larger rectangle, until it was a square. The parchment was browning on the inside, and upon further inspection, he noticed the paper was nearly the size of the Marauder's Map unfurled at least four times.

"...Perhaps it isn't as large as Luna places it," Starbuck argued. "Maybe it's something easily concealable, like a dagger."

"I doubt Youngblood would have called it the 'Sword of Amenophus' if it was a dagger, Starbuck." The Sliatyckx assistant captain rectified in a sardonic tone.

Harry's tongue was busy mapping his lower lip as he stared past the brown age spots and blemishes. There were definitely images under the aging....

"No...it needs to be compact and lightweight if it goes from here to his chambers." Hermione theorized, fixing her eyes on the stone floor. "Otherwise he'd have kept it in his quarters."

Harry's eyes traced a long, thin, yet jagged line curving into a distorted circle....

Nikola snapped her book shut as everyone thought. "Maybe he transfigured it into some disguise."

"A book, a quill, maybe, but where's the substance connection?" Kaltag queried, lifting a brow. "You can turn a teapot into a tee shirt, but a sword into a book? No association."

There was a dark sphere connected to another line under the first, and Harry could make out the hue of scarlet....

Huffing in disagreement, the blonde Entity challenged her sibling. "What's to say the book isn't about swords? There's your association, genius."

"Still, it wouldn't work if you think about it." Starbuck put in. "Maybe it's a paperweight?"

The first wire seemed to have tiny links on it. Come to think of it, Harry noticed the second wire did, too. There was something larger attached to the first line, and it was—he wasn't too sure—blue.

"Could be an inkwell, then." Ron added for good measure. Harry continued to tune out their conversation.

He had just discovered some badly disfigured letters, perhaps, making out a word under the link with the sphere. 'R...'

"...I still think it could be a book."

"Of course you do, 'Ms. I'm-Never-Wrong'." The ginger-haired Smythe taunted.

Squinting as his scar tingled, Harry plowed on, making out an 'A.'

"Says you, Admiral Arrogant." She spat, flinging a book to the pile. Hermione's shivering sigh signaled her anxiety.

His eyes wandered back to the line when he had trouble with the third letter. The wire was jagged at equally spaced intervals, pinched at one end and growing into an oval, only to be pinched again. Brushing his nose against the paper for a better view, Harry strained past the tan discoloration.

Links. They were links: and he was sure at the joining of the circle a ways up was a clawed fetter...a chain?

"This isn't the time nor is it the place to start a row, Nikola." Kaltagonus scolded. The female Celestial merely scoffed and hissed something in Greek.

Harry huffed in irritation. The third letter could have been either a 'V' or a 'W'. But the fourth was most definitely an 'E.'

"Oy, we haven't figured out what the sword could be." Ron reminded the bickering duo. "Maybe he's transfigured it into his Death Eater mask."

"Ron!"

"I'm not entirely convinced this guy is who he says he is, Hermione." He argued, overlooking her exasperated expression. "Hasn't given us much of a reason besides the fact he's unbiased toward all houses."

"All of the professors—with the exceptions of Snape and Einar—are unbiased toward houses." Starbuck answered, a smile of amusement attempting to break over his lips. Frowning, Ron quirked his mouth to the side . . . .

Harry discovered the first wire was also a chain, and its letters underneath read 'A, M, and E'. Harry wracked his brain: a sphere and a rectangle on chains? Dragging a finger over both shapes, he realized both were depressed in the thick parchment. Was something supposed to fit there?

"Something tells me there's more to Kenward than he implies." Kaltag spoke. Harry briefly glanced up from his musings to observe his friends. "Whatever he's hiding, we've got to keep it from the wrong hands." Narrowing his eyes, Harry watched as Kaltag's fingers fumbled around his neck.

A sphere...?

His slender digits tugged out his necklace, and his fingertips rolled over the...the . . . .

Harry's eyes widened.

'R', 'A', 'V', 'E'.

RAVE.

RAVEN.

RAVENSTONE.

His eyes widened to the size of quaffles as he watched his dorm mate roll the reddish-black stone between the pads of his fingers. It was there. All along. Glancing in slight disorientation at the large map-sized parchment in his hand, he his eyes lighted over the

sketched sphere with red and black clouds. There it was, one in the same. His eyes briefly lit over 'A, M, E'. Amenophus. It had to be.

Kaltag was wearing the scepter the entire time.

And Kenward wore Amenophus around his neck in the form of the amber jewel. But as the legend portrayed it, the stone from Amenophus was, at times, cobalt.

The weapons were right under their noses the entire time. It all started to make sense. The conversation he, Hermione and Ron had eavesdropped on back at Number 12, Grimmauld Place.

"Well, Sirius, I'm on my way to the school," he revealed. "To let Albus and the others know about them."

"The weapons?" Sirius spoke urgently. "You know where they are?" Harry's eyes widened and he shifted closer to the door, Hermione and Ron leaning on him from behind.

"Yes. They're in the safest hands possible. Or rather, necks."

The conversation with Dumbledore after he'd had a vision.

"I see you've made friends with Kaltagonus Smythe and his siblings. No doubt you construed they are Spiridon's children." Harry's smile was small, but content nonetheless. Dumbledore toyed with the neck of his robes in thought before beaming. "Well, on to more important matters."

And they had learned the Axial Battalion had possessed one of the weapons, no? Blinking rapidly to digest this information, Harry realized it went deeper than this.

The museum raids earlier in the summer...and—he swallowed deeply—the reason Aripedes Academy was destroyed. All because of the chains around Kaltag and Kenward's necks. Weapons of power.

But, if Kaltag knew, why didn't he tell them? Was this some sick joke to him? Lead them on a wild hunt, have them break countless rules before he broke the news to them? Was he that reckless? His hands

balled into fists at his sides, one of which was further inflicting damage on a centuries old chart.

"What's that you got there, Harry?" Ron's prying voice disrupted his livid thoughts. Brown and blue eyes landed on him, in various stages of concern. Glaring directly at Kaltag (who was taken aback by the gesture), Harry thrust the plot into the air for all to see.

"What's your problem?" Kaltag defended in a haughty tone. Harry tapered his eyes and glared daggers at the Celestial.

"When were you going to tell us," he forced himself to hiss out slowly, "that you had the Scepter all along?" Eyes roved over the tanned parchment and drifted between both teenagers.

"What?" The prefect asked, staring at the green-eyed Gryffindor in blatant disbelief. Watching her best friend out of the corner of her eye, Hermione pursed her lips.

"What are you talking about, Harry?"

Exhaling sharply, Harry jabbed a finger in Kaltag's direction. "He has had the scepter all along."

"The what?"

"The Scepter, the Ravenstone Scepter!" Harry beat into everyone's head. Releasing a dry laugh, Kaltag's stroking fingers abandoned the swirling orb.

"How have I had the thing the entire time? I don't even know what it looks like!"

Angrily tossing the map to the center of the room, Harry didn't realize that everyone's flinch was not attributed to his uttering the name 'Voldemort'. "You knew! You've led us on some wild foxhunt when you've had the Scepter all along!"

"I don't have it!"

"Oh, sure!" Kaltag's orbs were fierce orange as Harry snarled. The fire within those eyes was more dangerous than any ravaging fire on land. "Like it isn't hanging around your neck!"



"What?" his interjection was one of mixed reaction, Harry decoded, from anger, disbelief, and surprise. Hermione cautiously stepped forward and lowered herself to pick up the discarded parchment near Starbuck's feet. As she stood, Ron and Nikola looked over her shoulder whilst the teenage seekers were silent. Kaltag stared with skeptical cerulean eyes at the clever witch, while Harry stared at the dangling pendant. Hermione's eyes roamed across every detail she could gleam from what were visible, and with her astounded stare, Kaltag's eyes expanded even more.

"But...no..." his voice was barely above a whisper. His pallid expression concerned Harry somewhat. Perhaps he really didn't know . . . . "He...he wouldn't have...he would never..." He stammered.

"It is." Starbuck murmured, his face equally ashen. "He did." Kaltag's mouth opened to say more, to argue, Harry mused, but a small pop from this throat was all that he could manage. The emerald-eyed student watched as the Being's hand grasped at the stone firmly. Kaltag's eyes traveled down to his fist, and without warning, he forcefully wrenched the silver chain from his neck.

With an avid fascination, the untidy-haired Gryffindor observed the Being closely, watching as his chest heaved and his eyes gleamed. "'Protect it', he said." Athena's eldest rasped. "'It'll protect you'." His eyes flickered from understanding to fury within a blink, and Harry noticed his grip tightened on the orb. "Bull." Kaltag hissed furiously. "He never said having it could also get me killed.

"He lied to me." The agitated Celestial held up his fist to eye level, and let the globe dangle from his sweaty palm. As it swayed gently in his fist, Kaltag simply followed its every move.

The office occupants began to stir from Kaltag's calm tirade, Ron being the first to break the silence. "It was in the Tower the entire time." The classroom groaned softly as the Paradors assimilated the situation's gravity.

Kaltag let out an irreverent snort. "Right around my neck."

Harry scrunched his eyebrows at the dull stab of pain firing across his lightning-shaped scar. They were wasting time. The wind picked

up outside and the door to the office swayed slightly. "Well, if we've got the Scepter," he stated, trying to draw the despondent Being's azure gaze. "Then we're drawn. We've got one of the weapons, and Voldemort can't take it away." He paused, fixing his gaze between Hermione and Ron. "And if Kenward is turning it over, then the odds are evened." Hermione's mouth fired open to protest, but she was thwarted.

"Well, there must be some way to bring about the Scepter." Nikola butt in. "We can't exactly fight them with a necklace, can we?"

"The incantations," Starbuck prompted, their identical gazes locked. "They're awoken with incantations."

"Well, if that's true, then Kenward's already done his." Harry spoke. "His necklace is Amenophus, but he can change it back and forth at will."

"So where can we find the charm?" Ron spoke, his eyes moving over the journals littering the floor. "I am not going through these books again."

"Maybe they go into something. Maybe that's what the crystals are really for." The blonde female suggested. Harry's brows furrowed.

"I reckon you push them in a hole and they transform or the incantation appears...." Ron trailed off, finding fault in his own scheme.

"Did dad tell you anything?" Starbuck asked of the abnormally silent Kaltagonus. The boy's face was blank as his head shook negatively. With a drained sigh Starbuck regarded his older brother. "Didn't think he would have."

"There must be some place the incantation is." Hermione declared, throwing the parchment-map into the air. "And it's in one of these books."

Ron exclaimed and stared at Hermione as if she'd sprouted mandrakes for ears. "There's no way I'm looking through those things again. I'll take my chances fighting with the necklace."

"Ron," the bushy-haired witch glared. "We don't have time to waste—"

"We'd be wasting time looking through the journals, Hermione!"

"You can be such a ne'er-do-well sometimes, Ronald."

"Spare me!" he quarreled. "We haven't got time to go through another thirty journals!" Harry rolled his eyes, ready to lash out at his best friends for wasting time sparring, when his eyes caught the light flutter of the diagram as the door wavered. Pondering the possibilities, his mind clicked.

"Wait," he barely muttered, stalling the dispute. He lunged at the parchment, unraveling it as he stood. Tracing his fingers along the blue rectangle and the depressed circle, Harry nodded to himself. "Must be magical parchment." He voiced. "There," he held the paper out to Kaltag, breaking through the throng to lay it flat on Kenward's desk. "Press the stone to the circle properly. Go on, then." He instructed.

Listlessly blinking at the Boy-Who-Lived, Kaltag ambled forward with chain in hand, giving Harry a hard look. His gaze fell from the determined emerald of Harry's gawk, to the discolored parchment. With one last gaze to the swirling stone in his clutch, Kaltag pressed it to the indentation.

Nothing happened for a few seconds; all mouths were snapped shut, and breaths of anxiousness were barely heard. Harry stared hard at the stone squashed into the parchment, privately hoping he was right. A quiet scuff was heard as someone's shoe snagged the flagged-stone floor. He was beginning to doubt he was right when it happened.

Elegant script curved under the depictions, appearing quite slowly to sight. It reminded Harry disturbingly of Tom Riddle's enchanted diary, only this was short, and in a foreign tongue. The letters looped into words, and the words coiled into sentences, and the six merely stood by in observation. Kaltag made the first conscious movement on his own, tilting his head to make out the spotted words.

"Can you understand it?" Harry whispered, his eyes never abandoning the scrawled words.

"Awaken from the...unknown," Kaltag strained to translate. "Ye dark and...crimson...stone." He paused, lowering his brows. The words curled and disappeared as he uttering them. Hesitating for quick moment, he finally continued. "Your need...is...is great, in this time so dark. Please...defeat this...evil; guide me on all j-journeys on which...I...embark...."

A ripple effect occurred on the parchment as a radiating goldenrod circle emitted from around the stone. Harry staggered back as the circles moved from the stone to the edges of the parchment, then back once more. The golden glow encompassed the small globe, lingering for just a moment before an invisible force levitated the chain in the air.

Harry's eyes broadened as the fluid-like silver chain spiraled around each other in a straight line, and the necklace swung around in midair to hover vertically.

Power seemed to be exuded from the necklace in waves, and Harry reluctantly wobbled backward as he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. Either the moonlight was especially eerie tonight, or the stone seemed to double in size. His mouth parted in shock when it tripled in size, and the thin chain seemed to thicken. Once smaller than a pea, the reddish-black gem was now slightly smaller than a bludger.

The hoary chain appeared to have grown twenty times its original magnitude and hardened into an immovable rod. The claw, which held the stone, gripped it firmly once more with its four talons; the rod itself looked weathered, with worn raven tarnish clinging to silver. Drifting serenely in the stiff office atmosphere, the transformation seemed to have come to its end.

No one moved to grasp the floating mace. The glass orb atop the baton swirled ominously, red churning around the darkness. A dampened, claret glow lit the stone in a smooth burgundy smolder, marred only by the swirl of vapors. The room was washed in a deadened maroon glow. Harry exhaled, not even realizing he had held his breath the entire time. Still, the caduceus hung in the air as if pleading to be grasped. His eyes slid from the Scepter to the Being who possessed it for quite some months.

Kaltag's face was decidedly pale despite the warm vermilion glow. It seemed to Harry the young Celestial truly hadn't believed the trinket in his safekeeping was the Scepter until he witnessed its conversion. Tentatively, Harry surveyed the Being as he gaped unblinkingly at the Ravenstone Scepter. The entrance quivered a bit wider and creaked audibly.

All eyes seemed to rest on Kaltagonus, staring fixedly on the Ravenstone Scepter. Fidgeting a bit nervously between the August-born Smythes, Hermione bit her lip fretfully. "Um...Kaltag?" She began uncertainly. The Being didn't budge. "I know it's too much for you take in now, but...the Scepter is waiting on you."

This statement sparked Harry's interest as well as the Being's. creasing his brows, the teenager considered the bright witch. "What do you mean, 'waiting on me?' Haven't I done enough?" he retorted. Looking every bit fraught with unease, Hermione wrung her hands together.

"According to the Profiles book," her tone evened into one prepared for lecture, "the one with the Ravenstone Scepter or the Sword of Amenophus is the wearer. And wielder." She muttered the last part under her breath. Kaltag's gaze journeyed back to the suspended weapon.

"You've got to take it, Kaltag." Nikola spoke up, her tone mild, not to startle her older brother.

"Yes, it knows you as its protector and its protected." Hermione picked up. The redhead sent her an awkward look. "You've had it all these months. Surely it will respond with you."

"But what about the Child of Phoenix?" He argued. "They'd probably wield it better than I could."

Sighing, Harry traced his stinging scar. "Unfortunately, we don't know who they are." But I believe it's really Kenward, he inwardly added, frowning deeply. "So, as of now, you're our best bet." The Celestial closed his eyes for a minute and sighed in defeat. Conflicting emotions played across his eyes as the stone's glow heightened somewhat.

Harry spared a glance out the window only to catch Ron's eyes in the process. Both boys observed the hemispherical body before returning their gazes. "The Death Eaters'll be here soon. Go on, Kaltag." Ron urged, his voice surprisingly firm. An expression of indecision stretched over the Celestial seeker's face before he pursed his lips. Shaking his head slightly, Kaltag inhaled, his eyes remaining on the Scepter.

"Well." He breathed irresolutely. Harry could feel the trepidation spilling off of the Paraffin. "Here goes."

Stretching his hand out, Kaltag dithered for a moment before he clasped the Scepter in his fist. A collective gasp went around the small room as he pulled the mace to himself. The orb's misty tendrils only danced in the moonlight, and Harry heard Kaltag's relieved sigh. Running a hand over his forehead, Harry sighed sharply.

"What a night." Ron groaned.

"And it isn't done yet. We still need to find the Hollows." Harry pointed out. Hermione nodded in agreement. But everyone's eyes were still on the Being clutching the main attraction. The student's eyes searched every inch of the staff.

He shook his head. "I can't believe it." He expressed. "It was right under our noses the entire time."

"All that research — for nothing." Prefect Weasley supplied. The glare from Hermione was tired.

"Kenward has the Sword, we have the Scepter." Hermione began, a frown slowly creasing her features. "I can understand why Kenward has the Sword—he can protect it because he's the Defense professor." Harry nodded, crossing his arms.

"But we're students," he stated the obvious. "Not much protection. Why'd he leave it with us if it's so important?"

"A bunch of teenagers with one of the world's most powerful weapons." Ron wrinkled his brows, looking between his friends. "That's almost no protection at all."

"So why did he let your father let you come to school with it?" Harry inquired, watching the door wiggle under their voices.

Hermione cleared her throat and lowered her eyebrows. "Hogwarts is the safest place in Europe. That's reason one."

"But why couldn't he have given it to Kenward? Or another professor or an Order member?" Ron grilled.

"And why, of all people, me?" Kaltag budged in, his brows once again knit in annoyance.

"Because Dumbledore knew the only way to keep the Scepter safe, was by giving it to a person who wouldn't think twice about the purpose of a necklace." The low intonation of Kenward rumbled from the wide open door. Harry's eyes zipped in the direction of the dark figure that was undoubtedly Kenward. And the soft, accusing, ocher glow of the rectangular prism around his neck further identified they were caught.

oooooooooooo

A/N: Mayhem in the next chapter. Look for it in a few days.

## Chapter Twenty: The Sword of Amenophus

Wands flicked out in under a second, their aims true at the dark figure of Professor Kenward. Tension was thicker than Hermione's hair in that office, with five wands in the professor's direction. The shady sword bearer leaned casually against the wooden paneling of the doorway, arms traversed, observing the bandits. Harry tightened his grip on his wand as the instructor's eyebrow elevated cynically.

"You realize this is an extreme. Even for extra credit." His tone was one of teasing, but the frowns adorning the Paradors' visages appeared to have failed him. The man's slightly upturned corners fell into a frown, and he straightened slightly, still leaning on the panel for support. "What are you doing here?"

"We could ask you the same thing." Ron blurted out, boldly raising his wand higher. Hermione only huffed at Ron's simple-minded retort; Harry noticed her wand was held much lower than the other wands. The man's thick brows lifted once more as he gave the room a once over.

Pursing his lips, the man drolly replied, "This ... is my office." Harry lowered his eyebrows, keeping his wand steady. With a pained frown Ron jiggled his wand at the Defense wizard.

"You've got a point, then." He gruffly reacted. The wizard's robes were parted slightly at the neck, and there, Harry caught sight of it. The amber jewel clung to his neck, illuminating the wearer's skin in vivid radiance. The seeker clenched his wand more fixedly.

Very slowly, he followed Kenward's wandering gaze. His brown eyes searched his for a moment before moving on to Ron's; his gaze loitered on the brown-haired witch before moving to rest on Kaltag. His eyes barely glanced at the Scepter firmly clutched in the Being's hands. Kenward's face was unreadable, but a spark lit in his eyes as they returned to the black-haired Gryffindor.

"I've heard of your adventures of old, Mr. Potter," he remarked, his eyes studying his boots for a second. At his smirk, Harry tightened his fingers around his wand, the wood slick in his palm. "I was wondering when you'd come 'round." Harry — for what seemed to be the hundredth time that evening — blinked. His hand hurt from gripping his wand so tightly, and he was now upset. Kenward was



taunting him? Narrowing his emerald orbs, Harry considered his professor.

"So, that's it?" he tonelessly stated. "That's all I am to Voldemort? A toy? A plaything for his own entertainment?" His wand hand was throbbing now. The heat seemed to rear within him, and he wished he could set it loose on the grinning wizard. Beside him, Ron shifted and Hermione lowered her wand completely.

"Harry..." she started with uncertainty.

"So what?" Harry's rant went on, his scar tingling like mad. "He thought it would be funny to send you to flaunt the Sword before you gave it over? To show me that he's capable of actually succeeding in his plans?" At the mention of Voldemort, Kenward's grin disappeared. Brows lowered, he cocked his head aside to observe the teenager.

"What are you on about, Harry?"

"This is just some sick game to him! To you all!" He was shouting now; his mark needled his forehead. The internal heat from his ability now poured out through his skin, and he was sweating. Nikola and Starbuck's faces creased at his voice, but Kaltag remained still, the Ravenstone Scepter glowing with bland brilliance.

Professor Kenward's face wrinkled in bafflement as Harry caught his breath. "I'm not sure what you're — "

"The game is over, Death Eater." He hissed, ignoring Hermione's reprimanding huff. Kenward's eyebrows flew toward his hairline. "Don't act so surprised that we've figured it out."

"Youngblood dedicated his life to the ridding of evil," Starbuck rubbed in, his orbs narrowed. "And here you are, destroying his life's work." Again, Kenward's countenance seemed perplexed. Knit together was his eyebrows, and his crossed arms seemed to slacken. A glint of something menacing flashed across the grown wizard's eyes, but it was gone before Harry decided to further investigate.

Clenching his jaw, Kenward raised his chin in the insubordinate Being's direction. "I haven't the slightest clue as to what you are

referring to." Harry cocked his head cynically, catching himself before he lowered his wand.

"So you admit it." Ron nodded self-assuredly. "You killed the real heir, and stole the journals to find Amenophus for You-Know-Who." At the accusation that Kenward was an alleged murderer, Harry elevated his wand firmly. "Didn't you?" The tall Weasley jabbed his wand in the instructor's direction.

"I don't see how any of you are privy to — "

"Yeah, and neither are you." Harry cut in, seeing a spark light across the man's eyes again. Abruptly, the man stood straight, his arms once again firmly across his chest with tapered eyes. His necklace appeared to glow with the intensity of his controlled anger. Harry squeezed his wand, ready for anything.

"I will do well to remind you all," his tone was the iciest they'd ever experienced, "that I am your professor. And you will respect and obey me." Hermione released a sort of strangled squeak, as if a house elf had outright refused her knitted hats. At Kenward's directive, Kaltagonus seemed to swell beside the witch.

"I believe such commands are invalid once the teacher abuses their power," He haughtily countered, thinning his eyes into slits. His hands constricted around the tarnished rod of the Ravenstone Scepter as he added, "or if they're a Death Eater."

If it were possible, the instructor's hostile façade melted back into one of deeper confusion. "What? You think I'm a Death Eater?"

"Oh, drop the theatrics already!" Kaltag exasperatedly spat. "We know what you plan on doing tonight! And why you have the Sword!"

Slowly, the professor's visage altered in various stages from perplexity, to pensiveness, delusion, and slowly, comprehension dawned. Releasing a mirthless snort, Kenward shook his head slowly. "You think I'm handing the Sword to the Death Eaters?"

"It's too late to go to them now." Nikola finally spoke up.

Harry nodded. "Just tell us how they're getting into the school."

The professor frowned. "Who?"

"You know who!" Ron lashed out.

"You-Know-Who?"

"Ye—no!" Ron pinched the bridge of his nose between the fingers of his free hand, shaking off his frustration. "You know — the Death Eaters!"

"What?" Kenward's voice sounded rather impatient.

"As if you didn't know." Harry took over gesturing with his wand. A pearl of sweat dribbling from his hairline oozed down his scar, lessening the stings. At Kenward's firm shake of his head, Harry rolled his eyes, gnashing his teeth. "Voldemort's ordered them to come here — to Hogwarts — tonight for Amenophus and the Scepter."

"What?" The man discharged a dissatisfied grunt before his brows were joined together in fury. "Silly, foolish children!" They flinched at his harsh pitch. Kenward growled deeply, turning to pace the space along the threshold. He spun on his heel to suddenly face them. "And you've informed Dumbledore? You can guarantee me this?"

Harry's face fell and he bit his lower lip. The seeker knew this would come back to bite him. "Well ... er ..." Hermione's mouth worked, and her hands fidgeted at her sides. "Er ... we — well, we ... we were ... we've . . . . No." His eyes expanded in disbelief.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to keep this a secret?" He hissed, rounding on them. Blinking away his shame, Harry narrowed his eyes at the wizard. "You've put the whole school in jeopardy!"

"Hang on, don't turn this back on us!" Harry harked. "You're the one going to him! It isn't our fault your dark master hasn't informed you of tonight's little get-together."

"I'm not a Death Eater." The man distractedly clarified.

"Could have fooled us." Ron muttered in a measured, sardonic tone.

Kenward paused to regard them with a dark look. "The last thing I would ever do was hand the Sword over to the enemy. I would die first."

"Oh, how very noble of you. He'd die for 'the cause'." Nikola acerbically pointed out.

"You don't need to believe me," he shrugged in agitation, his hand waving to the journals scattered about the floor. "You've obviously discovered and read the truth."

"Not all of it." Kaltag countered.

His russet eyes glanced over the Celestial with the Scepter. "Then you've clearly wasted your time."

"Huh. You're telling me." Ron murmured shaking his head disgustedly. Harry furrowed his brows, eyeing the journals on the floor in a blatant mess. He darted his eyes to the treading professor considering his reactions. Kenward was shocked. Kenward was upset. But most of all, Kenward was confused. He was baffled by their accusations of his being a Death Eater. Either he was a brilliant performer or he truly was just their innocent professor. Slowly, Harry lowered his wand, but kept it just above waist level in case Kenward attempted something tricky. The rest followed his example and Harry caught Hermione's audible sigh of relief.

"So if you aren't a Death Eater," the messy-haired youth began, "who are you?" Kenward faltered in his step, hesitating before considering the wizard.

"That is a complicated story."

"Start at the beginning." Kaltag advised grimly. "The truth."

The professor kept his gaze on the scepter wielder for a moment longer before nodding with a burdensome sigh. "Yes, I am Youngblood's heir. And yes, the journals are rightfully mine."

"Then why the secrets?" Starbuck disrupted. "Why keep the Sword and your ancestry secret?"

"Evil does not have spies only in the form of grown men, Mr. Smythe." He lectured with a grim smile. "Oh, no. All forms are taken on. Men, women, children, animals." He paused, staring at his cluttered desk. "Teenagers. Yes, you all are so easily enticed by the seductress known as power." The auburn-haired gentleman absently toyed with the blushing prism on its gold chain as he stared at the floor. "So absorbed in its splendor, you always disregard the notion of consequences."

"As I was saying, after Youngblood's death, centuries went by that no descendant truly knew who or even what he was. His consort was neither Celestial nor wizarding, and his son was born a neutral." He paused for a moment, wracking his mind for suspicions. "His descendants were neither Mortals nor Squibs. No one rather expected the leader of Thessaloniki to be anything more than human. And his brood remained as such until the late fifteenth century." Kenward grinned dismally, nodding to the mace in Kaltag's grip. "We've hypothesized that the malevolent wielders of the Ravenstone somehow channeled its energy through to Amenophus, blocking all magic from Youngblood's progeny. They are, after all, sister weapons."

"And after our magical ability was restored, we turned to our ancestry for an explanation as to why we were not normal. We, of course, looked to the journals for answers. We found more than we bargained for."

Harry's wand remained lowered, but still aimed at Kenward. Only Ron and Starbuck had their wands higher than his. Hermione and Nikola took to leaning on the Professor's desk during his tale. Kaltag was rooted still in his spot, the Scepter's smoky, fluid-like interior dancing calmly as its wearer's emotions were dampened.

Professor Kenward crinkled his brows in reflection, interlocking his fingers in his lap. Harry sighed, only to bite back a wince as the prickles in his scar sharpened. "We learned in his last statement, that he had separated the weapons. The Ravenstone Scepter went to his royal advisor's offspring, and through much research and many expeditions, we learned of the Scepter's dark path."

"My great-great-great and so on grandfather was a Seer. He foresaw wars, destruction, death . . . . And other supernatural events."

"The wizarding world wars," Hermione added at the man's temporary halt. He nodded once at the confident witch.

"And the Child of Phoenix." Kenward's eyes widened in surprise at the green-eyed wizard's disclosure, lowering his eyebrows once more.

"Exactly how much did you find out about Youngblood?" He carefully questioned. Harry glanced at Hermione from the corner of his eye, before returning to the older wizard.

"We know he made a prediction about the Child. And we know the Child will be a great advantage to the side of light." The Gryffindor revealed, watching as the instructor's dark orbs narrowed even more.

"Then you know too much." He scolded, frowning. Harry felt the heat rise and settle on his cheeks in annoyance and embarrassment. "The Scepter had disappeared since its last use in 1489 — and I assume you all know what occurred then?" The six nodded affirmatively. "No one knew what happened to it. My ancestors buried themselves deeper into the chronicles and investigation, driving themselves mad. What could have happened to the Scepter, that no one knew where it could be? They combed the battlefield of 1489, finding nothing. And thus, began the wayfaring of the descendants of Youngblood."

Here, he paused to look beyond the group, out of the window. A glint of — something, Harry couldn't define it, glimmered in the man's eyes as he observed the skies. "We've traveled the world, on leads on where the weapons might be. We've not yet traveled to the ends of the earth. Searching ... searching not only for what was rightfully ours, but also for this mythical Child of Phoenix.

"From as long as I can remember, we've been searching for both. My father raised me on Youngblood's journals, as his father did him, and his mother, et cetera. Harnessing the Sword's given power to seek the Scepter's location also furthered our search. He learned me on Amenophus and these journals so that one day, I could continue where they did not succeed. I would be dodging the evils they contended with, roaming from continent to continent. Of course, my father wasn't around often. I remained with my mother, studying these books while he was away. When he received a tip from a

nearby location, he'd take me along with him, and I'd gain experience. When I became of age, I left home to travel with him, becoming his apprentice." His eyes twinkled dimly at his revelation.

"I haven't returned home since then. After he died on the journey, I discovered I had luck accumulated from every past nomad of my family." At this, Harry trailed the man's gaze to Kaltagonus, and to the Scepter. "When I happened on a journey across Greece of all places, I succeeded where my explorer relations had failed. I found the Ravenstone Scepter in the protection of a Celestial. From what I understand, your father recovered the Scepter from the Crossbreeds of Olympus a few centuries ago. It has been under his protection since then."

There was a priceless look of astonishment on the Being of Elements' countenance, his bright eyes boring into the wizard's. "But ... if he had it all along, why would he give it to me? His protection is greater than mine." At this, the Defense teacher nodded thoughtfully.

"True. He can protect it with might." With another smile, he advanced toward the Being. Harry's wand wavered for only a moment before it followed Kenward's progress. Cautiously, he watched as the wizard placed two fingers atop the Ravenstone orb, his eyes fixed on the Being. "But you, Mr. Smythe ... you can protect it with heart."

The Celestial appeared every bit confused by the notion, his eyes landing on the much sought after weapon in his hands. Setting his wand at his side, Harry regarded the two weapons wielders. Kenward gave the Paraffin a reassuring smile, retaking his treading path near the door. "All right, all right." Ron interrupted the awkward silence. "You found the Scepter. But did you find the Child?" The query set the professor's face in a troubled frown. Shaking his head he crossed his arms once more. The other radiance of the Amenophus jewel brightened in intensity, setting the office in an orange flush.

"In that, I did not succeed." The shaggy-haired teenager felt his scar prickle as he observed his instructor. "I fear I will be looking for them for the rest of my life. My entire line has searched until their deaths."

Scowling at the drifter, Harry thinned his eyes into slits. "Well, why didn't you look under your noses?" he jeered, doubling his arms over

his robes. "The mirror, in fact?" Sighing heavily, Kenward's shimmering eyes fastened themselves on emerald orbs.

"Because we bear the weapons until we find the Child." He slowly explained. "We are the messengers, not the beneficiaries. I can only do simple spells with the Sword, and Kaltagonus can probably execute Level Six – the lowest of energies – maneuvers with the Scepter. Spells such as the Disarming Spell, the Reductor Curse, the Impediment Jinx and other first through third year enchantments are all I can do. The Child, however, has complete power and control over these weapons." He briefly halted to tug his tan handkerchief from his pocket to dab his forehead. "Only he or she can fully wield it, from a simple Stunning Spell," he carefully creased his kerchief back in order, "to the Unforgivables. Complete authority."

Kenward ended his explanation by tucking his handkerchief into his cloak pocket. Half-hooding his eyelids, he found little to abate his growing suspicions of Kenward's tale. This man had to be the Child of Phoenix. He just didn't realize it.

"Have you even tried?" he icily questioned, keeping his stance resolute. The man shook his head negatively, the amber necklace swinging from side to side as he did so.

"I don't need to. The Sword will refuse my command. If I say the Killing Curse, it'd probably substitute that for a Stunning Spell. If I kill, it'd have to be by the blade." His eyes took on a distant look as he scrubbed a hand over his stubbly goatee. "No one has ever killed with Amenophus. And I intend to continue on without breaking that tradition."

Quirking her head to the side, Hermione weaved her eyebrows together, a frown grooving her features. "But then you must have some idea why Voldemort would really want these weapons: They're useless to him. If you can't use it to it's full capacity, he can't either." Harry ran a finger over his slightly heated scar, sealing his lips to stave off the stabbing prickles. The office was shifted into a brighter shade of ginger.

"No, but I fear he would find a way." The adult wizard dourly stated. "Voldemort is keen on ancient magicks. He could probably find a number of enchantments or dark sorcery to very gradually break



whatever preserving wards are on the weapons. And with Mystikos as his ally..." Professor Kenward produced an audible sigh of dejection. "They've a fair chance at succeeding."

The prickles were becoming pinpricks of pain. Harry's index finger was starting to numb from his hard soothing. The scar felt warmer than normal under his finger, and the warmth from within was rising. He hadn't heard when Kenward began to speak. "We've kept Amenophus from the hands of evil thus far," Kenward was saying with firm resolution. "And I don't intend on undoing that protection it has been subjected to for centuries." The room was bathed in crimson as he spoke. The others were asking questions. Harry vigorously scratched his scar as the heat flared.

"How do I know how to—" Harry's scar seared across his forehead and he could not contain the pained hiss from escaping his lips. His forehead felt as if it was set ablaze, and a headache was sprouting from deep within his brain. "Harry?" It was Kaltag.

As soon as Harry found the courage to open his eyes against the pain, the first thing he noticed was Amenophus. The jewel was blood red in color. Kenward seemed too absorbed in the Gryffindor's well being to notice. The room's hue seemed to churn along the walls; as Ron moved closer to him, Harry noticed the stone set on top of the Scepter interweaved with shades of burgundy than scarlet and black. "Harry?" Hermione's concerned voice disrupted his thoughts.

"N-Necklace ..." his voice grated. His free hand gesturing to the worried instructor. The others' attention briefly went to the heir of Youngblood at his implication. A gasp was heard from Hermione, and for the first time that evening, Kenward glanced down at the scarlet prism. He held part of the chain between his fingers as he studied the gem. Harry bit his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. "Voldemort ... the Death Eaters ... I think they've arrived."

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Silence met Harry's admission, as the sear across his scar lessened somewhat, leaving a dull twinge. Kenward's face was inscrutable, except for the fierce determination in his eyes. "Where?" He sharply demanded.

"We don't know." Hermione answered, her features wrinkled in disquiet. "We're not really sure." She glanced promptly in Harry's direction. "The Hollows, we think. We're not even sure if it exists."

Through the haze of smarting, Harry distinctly noted the glistening conception in his Defense instructor's. Sucking in a breath to stem the ache, Harry gathered his brows over his stern emerald orbs. "Do you know where they are?"

Kenward's head swung in his direction, his eyes sparking with uncertainty before he moistened his lips. His eyes fell to his arms as he dutifully began rolling up his sleeves and snapping them into place. "The Founders of Hogwarts built the castle over abandoned caves." He explained while fighting with his other cuff. "A place where giants, trolls and their culture once thrived. Like their own Tower of Babel, only miles underground." Bunching up his right sleeve, the professor eyed them sharply.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go." Kaltag spoke, his determined voice matching Kenward's eyes.

"No."

Harry still found it in him despite the ache to stare at the man in disbelief. "What? Professor, if we don't go down there, they'll attack the school. They'll get Amenophus and the Scepter!" The Celestial argued heatedly.

"Which is why you all will remain here." Mouths hung open in incredulity as the wizard's hard voice filled the room.

"But sir—"

"It would be best," he spoke over Ron's looming dispute, "if only the Sword was in use tonight, considering you," he stared unblinkingly at the irate Being, "clearly do not yet know how to manipulate the Scepter." Harry and Kaltagonus both hardened their faces, identical in anger. "I'll not have you harming yourself or others." The boy grunted, gripping the Scepter at his side.

"Sir—!"

"Enough!" he abruptly stemmed Harry's impending argument. "Are we clear?" Harry's scar prickled viciously on his temple. The professor surveyed the group of Paradors, all looking every bit rigid in disagreement. Harry bit his tongue to keep from making a case against the instructor for keeping things from him.

"But—!"

"No buts!" his voice whipped, corresponding with a harsh look to meet his severe tone. He glared at the Paraffin prefect defiantly returning the gaze. Slanting his head slightly, he locked his eyes with the Celestial's. "Katalavenete?" He inquired in Greek. Harry watched a wide range of conflicting emotions flit over Kaltag's face. Most mirrored the rage within him. Breathing hard, the Being scowled at the professor.

"Katalaveno." Kenward's stare lingered on Kaltag for a few moments before he appraised the other students. Kaltag's head bowed, his face fixed on the floor.

"It'd be best if you stayed here." His soft, but unyielding voice instructed. With a slight glare, he added menacingly, "I will deal with all of you later." Hermione's eyes widened as large as saucers, and Ron's face blanched. Turning to Nikola, Kenward straightened his robes, barely concealing the blood red stone. "When I leave, go to Dumbledore's office. The password is 'Licorice Wands'." The Entity quickly nodded, her eyes wide and anxious. With another intense look, the bearer of Amenophus turned toward his door and marched out of the room. The six listened as his faint footsteps echoed down the steps and weaved through the classroom below. At last, they heard the slight creak of the door (Harry hadn't heard it before, he mused they should have set up a Siren Charm), and it slammed as he exited.

"How could he punish us?" Ron exclaimed, his eyes wild with anger. "We've pretty much saved the school tonight!"

Hermione huffed in annoyance. "We didn't save it. With everything we've done tonight, I'm quite sure the headmasters have a right mind to expel us..." She grimaced.

"Kaltagonus!" Nikola screeched in fury. Her eyes were unsettled, and gave off the impression of a slight smolder as she glowered at

the prefect. "You're not really letting him go off like that?" The edges of the Being's lips lifted faintly, and he raised a brow at the Entity's undoing.

"Have you ever known me to obey a professor during a crisis?" The Entity's scowl transformed into a sly smirk, and she nodded once.

"I thought so. Good to know Hogwarts hasn't dampened your unbearable hero complex one bit."

"All right, both of you, stuff it," Harry barked, anger at his flaring scar letting out against his friends. "We've got work to do."

"What work?" Starbuck questioned in denial. "You heard Kenward. We're staying here."

Ron looked at the stern-faced Celestial, an amused smirk playing on his lips. "You aren't really going to mind him, are you?" Starbuck glared in response.

Harry looked at his best friend through squinted eyes. "It doesn't matter if he has both weapons," he rasped. "Voldemort will probably send an army of Death Eaters for a task fit for two. Kenward's going to need back up."

"Good and well, Harry," Kaltag replied, studying the Scepter quickly. "But we've still got the setback of finding the Hollows."

To this, Harry stroked the raised skin across his scar, nodding confidently at the cluster of magical students. "As long as we've got the Room of Requirement, I don't see a problem."

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The assortment of Paraffins and Gryffindors raced to the Room of Requirement with minor drawbacks, using Harry's Marauder's Map as a guide. They narrowly avoided the lurking group of furious Aves officers with singed robes; they skirted around an ill-tempered Filch as they ascended the staircases. The rest of their journey continued without fault. Harry tried several times to locate the Hollows on the Marauder's Map. But even his father and his acquaintances weren't successful.

Which is why the anxious group could be found standing outside the Room of Requirement, waiting for Harry to summon it. Kaltag had carefully concealed the Scepter under his cloak, but could not do much to screen the ethereal claret glow from the orb. The floor around his feet was illuminated in an obscure crimson oval as his robes were secured around the brilliant weapon. Hermione fiddled with her prefect's badge, gazing at it with longing; Ron was undecided when it came to the choice of standing straight or leaning against the wall.

Harry's brand piqued slightly as he hovered in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. He hoped this would work. But it had to, right? This was the Room of Requirement. What Pince or the professors could not give him, the Room of Requirement surely would. He stared at the blank wall, praying the solution would be found behind the door to come. Sighing deeply, he clasped his hands behind his back and began his tread, deep in thought.

I need to find all the secret passages of Hogwarts.

He spun on his heel, and retraced his course.

The Hollows. I need to find the Hollows.

Another twist, and he resumed his pacing.

I need a map. I need to find the entrances and passwords to every hidden access.

Furrowing his brows against his scar's throb, Harry rotated on his tarsal to stride up the small route he created. Just for good measure, he retraced his steps. Glancing at the wall impatiently, Harry was stunned to find a door. He would have thought Dumbledore would have warded the Room of such requests. He didn't waste time dwelling on his thoughts and moved forward, pushing the door open.

When he entered, he thought his prior musing was accurate. The interior of the Room was dark, mostly black. He assumed Dumbledore did think ahead before he really inspected the area.

Stepping in the Room, the first thing he noticed was the slightly yellowed parchment the size of a country flag attached to the wall. Slinking closer, he realized there were four charts of the same large

size affixed to the wall. The entire space was darkened, except for these four charts, which were illuminated magically, he supposed. He went to the closest parchment, grazing his eyes over it. Upon further inspection, he deemed it was indeed a map of Hogwarts. The legend at the bottom curled in an antiquated script, dictating statues, paintings, busts, and every bit and bob that made Hogwarts home.

"This is Hogwarts," Starbuck voiced in disbelief. "The grounds, the forest, the pitch ..."

"I asked the Room to show me every secret entrance." Harry explained, studying a map of the dungeons. The others spread out to study the maps separately. Harry eyed the labeled portraits and suits of armor, spotting the Potions Laboratory and Snape's office. Eyeing the map closer, Harry noticed a red box indicated the secret entrances.

"That portrait leads there?" Ron spoke in amazement. "That cuts the time it takes for us to get to Charms in half ..." Harry's eyes traced the sublevel floor as he spotted the highlighted statue of Wilhelmina the Woeful. It only labeled its location, but not where it led. He turned around to question Ron's luck, when he caught the Gryffindor keeper prodding a red box with his wand. The map in front of Ron and Hermione immediately darkened, and an illuminated path from the object to its destination lit up. Facing his map, Harry pulled out his wand and tapped the indicated statue. The map dimmed, and showed the figurine led from the dungeons to the sixth floor. Pulling his wand from the parchment, Harry watched as it brightened to its original view.

"There are dozens of secret entrances." Nikola enlightened. "Are we going to tap all of them?" Harry furrowed his brows, gripping his wand firmly. I need to find the Hollows, the Gryffindor mused deeply. I need to find an entrance to lead us there.

He glanced at the maps on the wall just in time to see all of them darken. Instead of each showing a path, the one in front of Ron and Hermione stressed an intricate path, winding every which way about the castle. Harry strode forward squinting his eyes at the writing under the scarlet box.

"Gregory the Smarmy?" he recited. His eyes wandered to the label at the end of the map. "The fifth floor."

"That's near the prefect's lavatory, that is." Ron clarified. "I always knew there was something funny about that statue." Harry gave one last glance to the extensive passageway and headed for the door.

"We need to move." He instructed while yanking the door open. The six tumbled into the corridor, following Harry as he sped through. He took the steps two at a time, feeling the rickety stairway tremble underfoot. The Paradors leapt off the last stair just in time, as the stairwell shook and swung to the next landing. They dashed through the sixth floor corridor, eyes looking wildly about for any onlookers. Harry's mark tingled madly as he ran, his arms swinging as if to push him faster. If Voldemort succeeded in getting the weapons ... he urged his legs to work faster.

They were almost to the stairwell when Harry nearly ran headlong into a soft body. The person gave a startled noise, too high-pitched to be a wizard. Harry looked up, wondering whom he had nearly bowled over.

"Ella!" Kaltag eyed the girl in surprise. "What ... what are you doing here?" The red-haired witch caught her breath, settling her coffee-hued eyes on the Being.

"I ... I don't know." She replied, wrinkling her brows. Harry followed her example. "I was leaving Professor McGonagall's office, and I just felt this ... this," she shook her head slowly, staring at the ground to continue. "This ... foul sensation. Like something wasn't at all right." Immediately, Kaltag pushed forward, appraising the witch in concern.

"Are you all right?" He queried, his eyebrows knit together. He leaned forward slightly after her slight head shake. "It wasn't another vision, was it?" He asked quietly, but Harry heard it anyway. The witch took on a defeated look but shook her head again. Nodding somewhat, Kaltag glanced over his shoulder at the waiting group. "Listen, Ella, it'd be best if you go back to Gryffindor Tower now." Again, her brows lowered as she carefully considered the group. Her eyes settled back on the redheaded prefect in front of her.

"Will you go with me?" Harry saw Kaltag bite his lip.

"No. I ... have to do something." He tiptoed around the truth. Staring at the fidgety assembly once more, she narrowed her eyes.

"What's going on?" She inquired. "It's after curfew. And not all of you are prefects." When no one answered, she searched their eyes. But her own eyes fell between her and Kaltag, and they widened. Harry spotted the reddish glow on her robes and the floor. "What is that?" She whispered. Harry hadn't even noticed Kaltag had not veiled the Scepter since they'd left the Room of Requirement.

"Ahem," the Celestial coughed, looking at the witch. "That. That is ... er . . . ."

"Tell me the truth, Kaltag." She demanded quietly.

"Oy," Ron rolled his eyes. "I swear, you're just like Ginny." Ella's cheeks colored at the boy's statement, but she returned her gaze to the flushed Being.

"Ella, we haven't any time. Just go back to the common room," Kaltag instructed. "You'll be safer there." Her eyes darted between the Scepter, the Being and the rest of the group.

"Safer? What're you up to?"

"All right, we don't have time for this," Nikola barged in. "Let's just take her with us."

"Take me?" Ella turned her attention to the Entity. "Take me where?" Harry started past the two as Kaltag grabbed her hand and pulled her along.

"Come on. Stay close, and always be on guard."

Harry sprinted down the next staircase, their crowd now one, albeit, puzzled witch larger. His heart leapt in his throat as they made it to the fifth floor. He didn't slow his speed until he spotted the tall sculpture. Panting slightly, he examined the stone figure. "This is it." He needlessly announced.

Gregory the Smarmy looked to be a worn statue, with part of its collar missing and a worn groove on one of its thighs. Even the floor around its wide base seemed rut. The statue's expression had a sneering grin and its eyes — though granular stone — were sinister. Everything about the statue gave off an air of malice. It glistened in



the torchlight, as if it were covered with a thin coat of slime. "I don't like this," Ella uncomfortably shifted. "Not at all." Gregory's arm was extended, his fingers curved slightly inward offering a handshake, and his lip curled as if silently growling. Harry placed his hand on the statue's coarse finger, feeling the moisture.

"It's slippery." He scrunched his face, wiping his hand on his robe.

"Doesn't matter," Hermione spoke, looking down the corridor both ways. "Just say the spell and let's go." Harry froze. Spell? He mentally slapped himself.

"I forgot to get the incantation." Hermione's piercing gaze rested on him. Her eyes held a glint of reproach, as her jaw snapped firmly in place, hinting her anger.

"I don't remember seeing one," Ron offered, bunching his brows atop his baffled eyes. "I remember seeing the spell 'Foris' for that painting, I mean, how could you miss it? It was in bright green! But ... not for this one. I don't think all statues have spells or passwords for openings. Fred and George have found dozens of secret entrances without . . . ." He shook his head, mumbling to himself.

"Maybe there's a knob you press," Nikola suggested, looking around the back of the statue.

"Maybe there is a password." Starbuck proffered. Harry frowned, inspecting the unctuous figure. "Or maybe he just lives up to his name." Hermione had her wand out, muttering incantations and something about ridiculous effigies. Ron was rubbing his hand vigorously on his robe from touching the oily statue; Ella stood still near Kaltag, eyeing the mace in his hands with mistrust.

Harry's eyes scanned the statue, looking for anything out of place. His eyes were still menacing, his nose was slightly crooked. Harry lifted his hand to take the hard snout between his fingers as he pulled, pinched and tried to twist the nose. It didn't budge. Sighing in frustration, he took in the long, mineral neck, the thick, chiseled robes and — he pushed one of the buttons on the carving's waistcoat, without any luck.

"This is really frustrating." He murmured, adjusting his brows in irritation.

"Why don't you pull his finger?" Ron proposed, although Harry thought it was more to lessen the mood than for work. His green eyes trailed the graze on the statue's thigh and its other straight hand resting at the other's side. Hermione and Kaltag both knelt near the cubed base, their hands racing across the texture.

"You're sure you didn't see a password, Ron?" Hermione asked once more. The Weasley scoffed in a scandalized manner.

"Of course I'm sure."

There must be something he was overlooking. He doubted the head turned, since someone would have had to stand on the base to reach and twist it. Maybe they had to move it by wand? That would be too much trouble. He sighed sharply, staring at Gregory's legs. Perhaps if they pulled it...? "Ugh, we're wasting time." He chided himself. "It's got to be simpler than that."

His eyes stared at the scuffmark on the thigh; what would make that mark? Maybe they had to find the piece that fell from its thigh and hold it in? He moved to look behind the statue and nearly stepped headfirst into its outstretched hand. The fingers were still curled inward. Of their own accord, his orbs fell to the scuff. It looked somewhat rough, but even. Green eyes traveled back to the fingers; looking at them closely, he noticed the digits weren't as long as the ones on the other hand.

"Hang on," he mumbled to the others. They quickly halted their probing, observing their implicit leader. Harry stretched his fingers at his side, slowly outstretching it toward the statue's hand. The speed at which he moved felt like it took forever, but alas, his hand gripped the slippery phalanges. Licking his lips, Harry hoped this was it. He tugged, feeling slight movement from the arm. He tugged again, but it barely moved. Grasping the arm with both his hands, he looked up into the stone eyes void of pupils. Heaving a breath, Harry shot up from the floor and pressed all his weight on his hands. The arm cowered under his strength and swerved downward, scraping the mark on the thigh.

Harry had to stagger back as the statue rumbled a bit before it slid to the left, the sound of stone grinding on stone punctuating the stillness. As Gregory the Smarmy's image ground into place, the

newly lowered hand wound slowly back into its extended position. As the statue ground to a halt, Harry caught sight of the secret entrance under it.

It was a dark gap big enough for one person to jump into. He couldn't see the bottom from his position, and though he'd rather inspect it before entering, the sharp tingle from his scar reminded him they had no time to waste. Fumbling for his wand, Harry moved to sit on the rough periphery. As his legs swung into the opening, he paused before pushing off with his hands.

Unlike the Chamber of Secrets, with its extensive pipeline sliding him under the school, Harry fell for barely two seconds before he hit the ground. Dust kicked up under his body as he landed on his feet, but lurched in surprise at the quick landing, ending up on his behind. Coughing as he choked on the filthy, stale air, the Gryffindor scrambled up, looking at the dark faces nearly five yards above his.

"Harry! Are you all right?" Hermione's voice echoed from the hole. Dusting off his robes, the raven-haired teenager gripped his wand tightly.

"Yeah, yeah," he called. "Just come down one at a time. And be careful." The voices from the others drifted softly into the cave, while Harry turned to observe his surroundings. Flinging his hand around him, he grasped at air, feeling around in the darkness. "Lumos." He muttered, summoning light to the tip of his wand. It flared instantly, setting the surrounding area in a dim glow. From what his wandlight touched, there was a wall at least one yard in front of him, and one three yards behind him. It was as if they were in a miniature foyer, only void of life and warmth.

"Oof!" A muffled voice grunted behind him. Holding his wand over the dark figure, Harry made out the wavy head of Starbuck. "Blech!" He spat out a mouthful of dust. "Could've warned me." He threw the wizard a black look. Pulling out his wand, he too muttered the Light Spell, looking around with Harry while another person fell through. Hermione landed in a crouched position, dusting off the hem of her robes as she brought out her wand.

Brown eyes fluttered in the wandlight as they took in the compact room. "Fascinating." She breathed.

"Ack!" Ron dropped to the fissure floor like a sack of rocks. The red-haired Gryffindor prefect clambered to his feet, wiping off his robes. "It's a dusty cave, Hermione. I hardly see anything fascinating about it." Ella, Nikola and Kaltag fell through respectively, the girls lighting their wands as they stood up. Kaltag held fast to the Ravenstone Scepter, its red glow providing more light than a standard wand could.

Harry guided his wand over a slender passageway in front of him. "Let's move." He commanded. Above them, the grating of Gregory the Smarmy's statue signaled its shift back to its original position. The passageway was so narrow, his shoulders and arms kept scraping both walls at the same time. The wizards, witches, Entity, and Beings held their wands in front of them, walking down the passage in silence.

Despite the course being covered in dust and the walls being moderately rough, Harry could spot pipes breaking through the walls overhead or on the side, most likely leading to lavatories above. He spotted a blank wall ahead before making a sharp turn left down another wider passage. There were several sharp turns and corners they came across, entering each new route with renewed speed. They had wasted too much time. The Death Eaters were sure to be in the Hollows by now.

Their shoes were thudding on the ground disturbing the once settled dust when Harry paused as his rising foot lowered to meet air. "Stop!" he ordered, in case there was an abyss of some sort. Directing his wand out in front of him, the light illumined several intervals of sharp grooves. A stairway. "Stairs." He announced. Starting down, Harry trotted down without a second thought to the dangers they may hold, his wand a guiding beacon before him.

They came to a landing; when everyone gathered again, he started out for another passageway with more sharp turns, leading further and further down the school. It wasn't two minutes later the jogging seeker came to another, more precipitous slope: this time, it was a broad stone slide. The walls seemed to stand out more against the steepness of the slide. "Erm, it's a slide." He informed.

"What's a slide doing ...?" Kaltag grumbled from the rear. Harry knelt down, placing himself on the very edge. From his position, the slide looked long and appeared to glide deeper into the school. His

mark throbbed, reminding him of what needed to be done. Clutching his wand in reassurance, Harry let go. Despite it being made of stone, the slide was unexpectedly smooth. His trousers and robe scuffed on irregular pieces at uneven grooves, but the ride was trouble-free. It was practically the Chamber of Secrets without the grime and humidity. He was right: the slide was steep, and several times he thought he felt himself rise completely from the surface, only to meet the floor once more. He slid for another few seconds before the slide made an unexpected veer and tilted at an uneven position. As the tilt sharpened, Harry released a startled yell as he was thrown from the slide and face first onto the floor.

His arm throbbed as he wobbled straight, gripping the wall for support. The young wizard pulled off his wire-rimmed glasses and wiped the dust off with the hem of his jumper, jamming the spectacles back on his nose. Yanking out his wand to light it again, he didn't turn around again as he heard the muffled grunts of surprise from his troupe landing hard on the surface. "Never again." Ron groaned, massaging his side. Harry studied the three blank walls before him. This room was much smaller and narrower than the first area they entered, and other than the slide behind them, there were no narrow passageways to continue. "This it, then?" Ron inquired quietly, panting from the trip. Harry stared at the blank walls in disappointment, hoping this wasn't a dead end. This wasn't the Hollows, unless they had missed it somewhere? There weren't any other passages branching off. They had been through every opening, hadn't they?

A shriek sounded from behind Ron and the recently arrived Hermione, signaling Ella's entry. Ron cushioned her landing by grabbing a fistful of her robes before she met the ground. She murmured a shaky word of thanks, rubbing her arms in fright. "This can't end here?" Hermione had moved to stand beside him as the Smythes dropped in. "I don't even think we've left the school."

The Boy-Who-Lived frowned at her words, looking about for any hidden stone depressions or protrusions to reveal another channel. His hands ran over the abrasive stone, scratching desperately for an unseen lever. "No, no!" He grumbled aloud. "This can't be it!" He growled, balling his hands into fists. "This can't be it!" He raised his fists and pounded them on the front wall in a fit of rage. Under his balled hands, the left side of the front wall sprang open, and the

green-eyed wizard lumbered dazedly through, righting himself before he fell.

The cool, fresh air was welcomed wholly into his lungs. Behind him, the gaggle of Gryffindors and Paraffins exited the hidden pathway, glancing around in reminiscent misunderstanding.

"Are we ..." Ron paused, allowing his roaming eyes to adjust to the torchlight. "Are we on the ground floor?" Taking in his surroundings, Harry indeed noticed they were on the direct path leading into the Great Hall.

Hermione snorted, pocketing her wand and placing her hands on her hips. "'Smarmy', indeed."

"I thought it was supposed to lead us to the Hollows!" Starbuck groused. The others appeared forlorn at the statement, groaning quietly.

"Pipe down!" Ron hissed, motioning for them to lower their voices. "Filch's office." The Paradors immediately quieted, hoping their disturbance didn't alert the cracked caretaker. Harry pursed his lips, raking his brain for an explanation. He did ask the Room of Requirement for a direct route. So the Hollows had to be here, behind another statue or portrait. But they didn't have time to go through all of them. Groaning in dissatisfaction, Harry wished the Room could just pop up on whatever floor whenever he needed it. How were they going to locate the Hollows now? What if Kenward needed their help? What if Voldemort already had Amenophus? He bit back a routed groan. Footsteps growing louder alerted him to the reddish-white glow bathing his trainers in light.

"Harry..." The Scepter bearer's intonation was soft, almost remorseful. The Gryffindor cradled his head in his hands, closing his eyes. "I really hate to say this," the Paraffin sighed in revolt for appearance, "but maybe Kenward was right. Who knows what would happen? I can't control it." The wizard huffed in objection. "Then again, he may be in trouble..." To Harry, it seemed the Being was at odds with himself.

"There must be a way to the Hollows." Hermione assertively proposed. "The statue may be deceiving, but it led us here for a reason."

As Harry reopened his eyes, he caught a glimpse of the reddish-white orb affixed to the discolored baton. "Kaltag," he began tentatively, "when did the stone change color?" Blue eyes glimmered in befuddlement before they sought out the mace in curiosity. Harry narrowly eyed the churning depths inquisitively. An exultant gasp broke through his musings.

"Of course!" Hermione nearly cried, discounting Ron's fervent shushing. The clever witch barreled toward the boys, yanking the Celestial's hand clasping the Scepter. Her bright eyes were gleaming with conviction as she held the weapon level with a slight smile. "Kaltag, you've got to concentrate. Hard."

The Celestial prefect shook his head in bewilderment. "Hermione, what—?"

"The journals, remember?" She implored, her eyes fierce with recollection. "Youngblood wrote that the weapons can locate each other with a single thought. Find Amenophus and you find Kenward." Harry gazed at the Scepter pensively, watching as it whipped agitatedly. Did it sense the presence of Amenophus?

Kaltag nodded somewhat shakily to the encouraging Hermione, holding the Scepter with both hands before him. His wide vision was glued to the restless globe. Wetting his dry lips, his eyes traveled to the group that now surrounded him, watching tensely as he attempted to locate the Sword. "You may want to stand back," he advised. "As it is my first time, I don't know what could happen."

Harry hastily pushed himself and Hermione back, viewing the Being at work. From his slight angle, he observed Kaltag closing his eyes, his face somewhat at peace, yet still anxious. The swirling duet of colors danced across his features, the smoke wavering slightly as he exhaled.

The youth was on tenterhooks, as time appeared to dawdle by. Beside him, Hermione's apprehensive countenance gave the impression that she might have been quite mistaken with her scheme. But he could not let her expression leave him in doubt. They were going to find Amenophus. They would find the Hollows. And when they arrived, he had no doubt Wormtail would be among the ranks of the Death Eaters. The only other living wizard or which

who probably knew most if not all the hidden routes, he mused, was Dumbledore. Wormtail had to have led Voldemort's servants through a connecting passage somewhere outside of the school's grounds. Otherwise, the headmaster and the professors would have locked down the entire institution, just as they had done when Sirius Black was loose three years earlier.

Suddenly, the Ravenstone pulsed once, a brilliant ball of light so bright, before it went back to its resting, white-red state. Harry shielded his eyes during this episode, and opened them to view the Being's look of ardent intensity on his visage. Another bright glow throbbed, and Harry blinked away the dancing white and black specks before his vision. Kaltag's knuckles were ashen from clenching the rod so firmly. Harry's scar bristled just as the light slowly built in intensity, nearly blinding him if he hadn't closed his eyes against the burn of his scar. Behind his lids the light seemed to dim, but not near enough for him not to shield his eyes. Cracking one lid to a squint, Harry watched the interior of the Scepter whirl so fast, it would have made anyone who stared at it long enough dizzy.

It happened all at once. The spiraling smoke in the orb spun wildly, the light still bright as before. As Harry struggled to both shield his eyes and take a peek at the Ravenstone Scepter in the Being's grasp, he felt it. It wasn't an unwelcome feeling, but it was definitely foreign. It was as if invisible tendrils surrounded his body, moving around him, through him, over him, in every possible direction. There was certain warmth to these invisible wisps, tickling his nose and ruffling his unkempt hair, which seemed to at once house a powerful magic. Without warning, there was a wintry breeze issuing from the scepter, and the warm undetectable vines froze over, filling him with the slight iciness reminiscent of a Dementor. When Harry's teeth began to rap under the frigidity, the chill disappeared.

It was at that moment the blur of white in the sphere abruptly ceased, leaving an eerie calm atmosphere. The Scepter's tone reverted to its usual glow, only stark white this time, but not blinding. Before the young wizard could utter a question, a ripple effect occurred in the area surrounding the Ravenstone. A loud crack ripped through the air and a rolling, unseen energy undulated through the teenagers, moving in a circular direction. It continued through the stone walls and down the corridor. Immediately following, Harry spotted a white beam shoot out of the Scepter's stone and streak through the air like



decelerated lightning. The ball of free light sped down the corridor toward the Great Hall.

"C'mon!" he directed the others, his legs already carrying him down the corridor. The beam was nearing the double doors of the Great Hall. Pulling out his wand while chasing the light, Harry nearly reached the doors before the band swerved sharply left, darting toward the entrance hall. He slipped hastily, changing his course and narrowly avoiding what would have been a painful crash into the stiff wooden doors. The light zoomed through the rank air, hissing somewhat as if crackling. Was it leading them out of the castle? Were the Hollows on the grounds?

In true seeker style, Harry's eyes never left the beam; it wasn't difficult, as the beam was not as erratic as the snitch was. Green eyes remained with the beam as his legs began to feel the effects of the abuse it had endured for the last hour or so. His scar prickled, and his legs felt as if they were on fire; he hoped they reached their destination soon. From the sounds of the wheezing group following him, they needed a break, too.

The beam did not go far; in fact, it dove at an angle into an alcove. Harry had time to come upon the bay entrance just as the light wriggled behind the foul statue and disappeared. Nikola and Kaltag were the first to reach him, their eyes glued to the point behind the statue. "It went back there?" She queried.

"It worked?" Kaltag murmured in astonished wonder. The burly figure of Odafin the Odiferous hunched before them, its fetid scent forcing Harry and the others to pinch their noses in a last attempt to save them from possibly falling off.

"Merlin!" Prefect Weasley exclaimed, scrunching his face in revulsion. "It's never been this bad before!"

"That's because it was just opened," a nasal-sounding Hermione explained, pinching her nose tightly. "It's probably been sealed for decades. Who knows what's rotting down there?" Harry was suddenly having second thoughts about saving the Sword.

"This is really quite foul," Ella spoke up after a good bout of silence. "Is this how you usually spend your evenings after hours at Hogwarts?"

"You have no idea." Ron dryly answered. Hermione's wand was whipped out, and Harry heard her mumbling several incantations and spells. He watched as the statue glowed blue, green, or red in response to her spells. Her brows pleated after every spell. By the number of spells and the varying shades, he could tell they were especially complex. Her exhale was one mingled with defeat and frustration.

"Kenward's locked the statue. He knew we'd be here." She shook her head in thoughtfulness. "It's definitely some powerful spell we either haven't learned yet, or will probably never learn."

"Now how do we get there?" Starbuck asked in exasperation. "I don't think we can pull his arms. I wouldn't even touch him." He rambled with distaste. "That's it. It's over." Harry couldn't believe this was happening. Starbuck was wrong. It couldn't just be over, like that. Apparently, the Entity near him was thinking along the same lines when she groaned in disgust and wrenched the clasp from her robe, pulling it off and shoving it in Harry's free arms. The cross Celestial marched over to the statue, her face livid as she glared at the eroded figure.

"Stand back." She ordered, heatedly rolling up the sleeves of her jumper. Harry had to be gently yanked by Kaltag as his eyes fixed on the blonde Entity of Intellect. Bending her knees and positioning her hands on the statue's side, he saw the Celestial narrow her eyes ardently before giving the sculpture a grand shove.

Shrill grinding was heard as stone ground against stone under Nikola's might. In merely four steps, the girl had thrust the especially large statue to the side without breaking a sweat. She clapped her hands together to dust them off and primly removed her cloak from Harry's limp grasp. "Some things you just have to do the Muggle way." She rationalized to the stunned faces.

"Right." Ron drew out, staring at the Entity in shock. Breaking through his daze, Harry stepped forward, looking at the cracked wall of the alcove that was hidden behind Odafin the Odiferous. There were small fissures and a particularly large breach through which more awful scents seeped. An outline of a small door he hadn't noticed before, reaching about chest height could be seen, and he warily nudged it with his wand. The door pushed open without fault,

revealing a small passageway. Biting his lip, Harry stared into the dim light.

"Nikola," he called, looking into the cavity. "You're the quickest of us all." Shutting his eyes for a moment of discomfiture to pass, he focused back on the hole. "You'd better get Dumbledore." He did not see her nod, but felt the cool breeze signaling her brisk exit. Harry discovered it would be best if they crawled into the opening, seeing where it would lead them.

He crept in on all fours first, his palms and knuckles scraping the rough ground below his hands. His knees were uncomfortably poked and prodded with coarse rocks and he could feel the scrapes drawing blood. His wand was clutched in his fist as an added protection. The passage was very contradictory to Gregory the Smarmy's passage, being rough and uneven and squat, but somewhat wide.

Finally, after minutes of silent crawling, the height of the ceiling gradually raised, allowing them room to stand and move about. Harry heard Ron's groan as they came to a halt. "Great. More stairs." Descending the steps, Harry knew they were deeper below the castle, if not the grounds. These stairs seemed to wind downward, deeper and deeper. There were coarse sandstone steps, with bits of rock breaking off of different steps. There were stalactites clinging to the ceiling, like the jagged teeth of a dormant monster. If he squinted hard enough, he could make out a few dark pipes exiting and reentering the ceiling.

He idly wondered if Salazar Slytherin knew of the Hollows when building his Chamber of Secrets. He had to have, if Kenward was right. The Founders built the school over old caves; he must have known. Which meant Voldemort might also have known.

Harry paused just before they passed through a vaulted entryway. He heard a muffled sound, and quickly turned to see if it was any from his company. Their mouths were shut. The sound happened again. It sounded like voices. They were close. Peering just around the corner of the entry, Harry eyed the wide stairwell carved between extremely high, dangerous rocks, leading down, down ... to a partially blocked circular area on the floor. Off in the distance was another stairwell and what appeared to be a darkened exit. Eyeing the broad stairway, Harry knew there was no turning back.

He slowly advanced, moving down the stairs, hunched just enough for the rocks to keep him out of sight. "Harry ..." he heard Hermione admonish very quietly behind him. The indistinct voices echoed off the rough walls, sounding every bit as tense as Harry felt. There was definitely more than one person down here, judging by the pitch of the voices. His side grazed a rock just as he halted halfway, and the tones were louder, harsher. Fixing his glasses, Harry carefully raised himself up, his eyes just over the rock peering down at the cluster of black blocking a stone pedestal. He couldn't see Kenward, but the Death Eaters were facing someone or something, and their voices cleared just a bit.

"...It over, envoy," a sneering, masked servant spoke. "...Hurt you too much for your cooperation."

"Never." The unflappable tone of Kenward's voice hissed.

"FOOL!" Another tone rumbled throughout the grotto. Dust and fragments from the stalactites peppered down on Harry's neck, forcing him to eye the icicle-shaped rocks. He ducked down quickly and descended lower into the cave.

"...Trouble, you are!" an angry voice yelled. "Once we ... to our master, you'll be ... and we'll finish you off!" He was on the last step now, his wand already in hand. He crouched low enough to be hidden from sight, lest a Death Eater decided to take this set of stairs to the school. Harry could not even fathom the trouble they would encounter if one chose to do so.

He lowered his brows at Kenward's hostile tone. "You'll have to pry it from my dead hands first."

"Is he crazy?" Ron hissed. "There are at least a dozen Death Eaters out there! They'll destroy him!" Harry pressed himself against the rock, forcing himself to breathe normally. They couldn't kill Kenward: He was the Child of Phoenix.

There was a pause in which he heard a number of guttural laughs. "So be it. Crucio!" There was a loud sound and an explosion, rumbling the rocks near his ears as small, jagged stones rained on them. This unfortunately caused a noticeable shriek from Ella, as

she jumped backward to stand and escape from the possibility of injury.

This, of course, alerted the Death Eater's to her presence.

"An eavesdropper!" One shouted. Harry saw the witch freeze, her eyes wide and fearful.

"A worthless, meddlesome Gryffindor." One minion wryly snorted as his company chuckled deprecatingly. "The fewer in the world, the better. Kill it." A cruel voice ordered. Footsteps thudded in their direction. Harry ground his teeth together and leapt to his feet.

"Let's go!" Harry instructed, jumping out from behind their hiding place. The Death Eaters stilled in surprise. "Stupefy!" The curse hurtled toward a stiffened Death Eater; the rest scattered. The minion slumped, slouching across the floor at his feet, stunned. The others emerged from behind the stairs, aiming curses at every Death Eater nearby. He fired a Banishing Charm at a lanky Death Eater, and scoured the room for any sign of Kenward. Harry staggered over a fallen Death Eater to charge around the room. Hermione and Ron were close behind, and Starbuck seemed to be firing curses off with ease.

"Potter!" a sycophant spat. Harry whirled around to spot the white mask turned towards him. The wizard raised his wand, but Harry already hit him with a Blasting Curse, knocking his mask off and sending him sprawling against the curved wall, sliding to the floor.

The Gryffindor cursed and hexed his way through the throng of Voldemort's servants; there were much more than the twelve Ron had estimated. He stunned most of them, pushing aside the dark robes, stepping over the fallen bodies and searching.

Searching for Wormtail.

As he blasted yet another Death Eater, he knew Wormtail had to have been the one to lead them into the cave. There probably was no one else on the side of evil to know such intricacies of the fortress. He raised his wand to knock out a charging Death Eater when a rough hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, pulling him brusquely down and out of a jinx's way.

"Potter," Kenward's ragged voice panted. "I thought I told you — "

"Impedimenta!" He interjected, firing at a rushing dark wizard. "You were in trouble. We — "

His eyes darkened. "Tell me the Scepter isn't here." Harry wrinkled his brows at the professor. He opened his mouth to answer when Kenward's eyes darted up and he saw a flash of silver emerge from between them. "Reducto!" A crimson beam was spat out of Amenophus, hitting a horde of Death Eaters. The ground shook slightly, and pebbles and earth fell on his head.

Harry used this time to escape his instructor's clutches to continue the fight and search. Searching the mixture of scrambling bodies, Harry spotted Ron and Ella on a crag, dueling with Death Eaters. Starbuck and Hermione were flinging curses with a trembling duo of Death Eaters. And Kaltag was setting fire to the robes of a few other servants of Voldemort, the lot scrambling up the unused set of stairs and out of the cavern. The Scepter was nowhere to be seen. A hand seized his shoulder and Harry did the first thing that came to mind: He whirled around, crashing his fist into the side of the other's head.

Unfortunately, it was Professor Kenward.

The man hissed, pulling Harry under a sizzling curse. "Is the Scepter safe?"

"Kaltag has it." He sighed in irritation, looking over to his friends. The man briskly nodded, rubbing the side of his head. He clenched Harry's shoulder in his grip, looking the Gryffindor directly in his eyes.

"Listen closely: Get him and the Scepter out of — ARGH!" his face contorted, and he grabbed his right shoulder in pain. Harry fell back, watching his professor stagger, dragging the sword in one hand. A darkening stain soaked through his robes and poured from between his fingers. Harry exhaled in disbelief. It couldn't be ... it — it wasn't true! There had to be a mistake. The blood. Kenward's blood.

Red blood. Red.

"Hand it in, old man." The undeclared leader of the Death Eater troupe insisted. Kenward's eyes briefly met Harry's before he swung the sword with his damaged shoulder and sliced the Death Eater's

wand in half, grimacing at the effort. Harry scrambled to his feet, moving to honor Kenward's request — but not quite.

"Frusto saxum!" Hermione roared. A jet of blue light spiraled from her wand, striking the giant rock above a host of Death Eaters. The rocks crumbled, clouting the four of them unconscious. The seeker watched Hermione race off toward the stairway. The Boy-Who-Lived made his way to the Scepter bearer, evading hexes whizzing by. Kaltagonus threw a beam of fire at one Death Eater, and shot a hex off to another with his wand. He swung around as Harry approached him.

"Reinforcements," he panted, throwing another Limb-Freezing Spell. "There are more Death Eaters out there." He pointed to the dark entryway. Harry aimed a Reductor Curse at a looming threat.

"Kenward's hurt." He informed, backing away and dueling alongside the Being. "We may need the Scepter."

"I haven't even used it for defense!" The Being protested, ducking a nasty purple hex. "What's got him?" The last Death Eater fled swinging his useless arms. The Paradors paused, taking a moment to breathe.

"I dunno, Cutting Conjunction? I — "

He didn't finish his sentence, as a strong Disarming Curse suddenly lifted them from the ground. Harry's back slammed against the cavern floor and Kaltag slid a ways back. Something appeared from underneath his robes, and Harry's eyes widened. The Scepter was rolling away! The Being groaned, wincing as he tried to move.

Harry rolled himself over, trying to reach the weapon before the Death Eater spotted it, but it was too late. The minion stalked toward the mace glowing red between the students and swooped it into his grasp as Harry's hand brushed the base.

"I HAVE IT! I HAVE THE SCEPTER!" He called out to his company. Harry grimaced as the wizard brought his heavy foot down on his back. "And I have Potter!" His name was spat out with such venom. The heel of the Death Eater's boot was pressing down into his back, sure to leave an imprint. The Muggleborn-murder advocate chuckled maliciously. "I'll have my promotion yet, Potter." Harry

turned his head to find his wand. What he saw was Kaltag struggling to crawl toward them. The dark wizard's eyes were still fixed on him.

"I'll be in the Dark Lord's inner circle, the highest ranking warrior; my reward for a task well completed." He didn't notice as Kaltag dragged himself closer; Harry spotted the fierce orange gaze. Kaltag's hands clamped down on the wizard's ankle, squeezing it. The startled victor didn't have time to react as Harry eyed the wisps of smoke steaming below his trouser cuffs. A bloodcurdling scream erupted from the Death Eater and he dropped the Scepter, shaking his leg in earnest. As he reeled back, stumbling toward the exit and howling, Harry's stomach twisted at the stench of burning flesh.

Harry heaved himself to his feet, grabbing his wand from under his stomach. Kaltag stumbled to his feet, taking the Scepter in hand. "Here." He thrust the Ravenstone Scepter into the Gryffindor's grasp.

"Me?" Harry exclaimed. "Why me?" The Celestial scowled and shrugged.

"I figure, Boy-Who-Lived, Child of Phoenix—one in the same, right?" Harry gave the Being a withering look as the last of the barely wounded Death Eaters made for the exit. He pushed the Scepter back into the hands of its owner as if it would curse him on the spot.

"Not today." He growled, trotting to his friends, now descending the stair path from their precipice duels. The cave was silent, except for the seven or so Death Eaters unconscious or grimacing in pain. Those who weren't completely incapacitated or unconscious somehow found a way to drag themselves to flee, much to Harry's chagrin. Ron gave a content sigh, surveying the black clumps scattered about the cave.

"All done, then?" He queried. Harry spotted the pockets of Hermione's robes to be laden down with things especially pointed; when she stooped to pick up the halves of the wand Kenward divided, he figured she was collecting the wands of the Death Eaters. Beside Ron, Ella gave the prefect a dark look while nursing a gash on her arm. Harry had barely closed his eyes before he heard a ragged gasp behind the group, accompanied by a scraping sound. Looking between Ella and Hermione, the latter of which broke rank to rush to their injured professor, still clutching his wounded shoulder.



"Professor!" She gasped, urgently motioning for Ron to help support the wizard's weight. Kenward gripped Hermione's shoulder with a blood-spattered hand, sustaining his weight with Amenophus as Ron moved to assist him. His coffee eyes sought out Harry for a moment, before they glided to the glowing mace. Harry swallowed in disappointment: Kenward sighed in relief.

"Still there. Good." He breathed heavily, allowing a minor smile to grace his lips. "Good work, every one." He eyed everyone in the group, and blinked when he spotted the new Gryffindor. "How'd you get dragged into this?" Beside her, the raven-haired wizard noticed an inimitable grimace from the top student of Paraffin. The boy seemed grateful when rhetoric failed the witch.

"What should we do now?" Starbuck asked, glancing at the path leading to the school. "Nikola's been gone a while." The Defense instructor creased his brows in thought, staring at the adorned blade for a moment.

"Bind the Death Eaters," he firmly huffed. "As best you can. Then we'll try to seal that exit." He inclined his head toward the furtive entrance. "Dumbledore should be here by then." The students paused for a breath, moving to their tasks only when they were sufficiently unruffled. Harry immediately turned his back on Kenward's incisive gaze, hoping to stanch the impending interrogation. As he muttered the Binding Spell, he noticed rubble in what was the center of the circular floor. Simply staring at the mound, he thought he spotted suspicious a flickering of white. Confused, Harry crouched over the reddish-brown pile, jostling the rocks aside with bruised hands.

Fingernails scraped over the coarse debris and he pushed, heaved, and tunneled through the small heap. He dug until he spotted the eerie glow under the next stone and carefully, he pushed it aside. Green eyes tapered as he eyed the flushed chutes of crystal. A warm scarlet blush, the precious rock resembled something of cylindrical prisms with rough bottoms; he counted five chutes total. Extending his hand, Harry gripped the crystal in his hand and stood, shaking off the dusty stone and studying its structure. Slowly, he turned around to meet the eyes boring into his back. Kenward was leaning on a boulder Hermione and Ron carefully set him against, with Amenophus limply resting in his hand.

"Quartz," his rough tone answered. "The crystals denoting the weapons." Harry lowered his brows.

"Is there any reason they were placed here of all places?" he softly inquired. The professor's grin was hollow, but to some extent — from what he assumed — regretful.

"Only the headmaster can answer that, Harry." The student inwardly scoffed in disgust, roughly setting the crystal by Kenward's robes. Stalking over to Ron, Harry decided to help the stiff prefect tend to the Death Eater he had hexed against the wall. When Ron didn't acknowledge his presence, Harry became irritated, eyeing Ron's face; the Weasley male was somewhat ruddy, his eyes fixed on the Death Eater. Harry followed his gaze to the immobile figure, shaking his head.

"Flint." Ron identified their former Slytherin schoolmate. "Just proves that all Slytherins are dark." Harry didn't comment, only staring at the boy's slack face—smug even in unconsciousness.

"Evancio." He murmured, watching listlessly as thin red twine shot out of his wand and wound itself around the insensible fiend. He pushed Ron away from the perpetrator and used a Mobile Charm to float Flint to the pile of bodies near the stairwell. Starbuck levitated the last unmasked Death Eater to the heap, rounding out the captured intruders at seven. Stifling a yawn, Harry nearly gagged when the revolting stench attacked his nostrils once more.

Kenward leaned on Amenophus, wobbling slightly as he clenched his teeth; his brown eyes narrowed at the captives. "Recognize them?" He asked. Harry folded his arms.

"Well, I think this one's Higgs," Ron nudged a young Death Eater with a head wound, "and that there is Flint." He prodded the old chaser for Slytherin with his foot.

"They're fairly young." Hermione commented, examining the cluster. "Which is why they were probably captured." She theorized, sniffing audibly. "Inexperienced, I'd say."

"Why do you say that?" Ron inquired rather sincerely. Hermione crossed her arms and stared at the group with a tilted head.

"First of all, they were way too careless with everything. Voldemort may recruit the best in Dark Arts, but honestly," he huffed gesturing at the other witch. "Why go through the trouble of killing her when they could have wiped her memory?"

"Because they're evil?" Ron suggested with biting wit.

"No," she thinned her eyes into slits. "Because they're young. They've got something to prove." She firmly stated. "Instead of sending his more experienced Death Eaters for this mission, Voldemort sent amateurs. Probably thought this was a fairly easy task. Notice that none of them are from his suspected privileged circle."

"So, you're saying what?" Kaltag shrugged, shaking his head slightly. "That this was training, some sort of initiation?"

"Exactly," she nodded. "Otherwise, why were there nearly thirty Death Eaters instead of five or ten? They're new recruits."

"Showing that they're worthy enough for the task." Kenward ended with a proud grin. "Good work, Miss Granger." The witch nodded with a blush. Harry tightened his arms around himself managing the information. If they were novices, wouldn't they have an appointed leader to make sure they performed the mission right?

"Wormtail," he suddenly broke in. "Where was Wormtail?" He cursed himself for not finding the good-for-nothing sooner. The others didn't help with their shrugs.

"I don't think he was here," Ron offered, scrunching his face. "And if he was, he'd be the first out that exit there." Harry brushed his nose as Kaltag strutted to the dark exit, Scepter in hand. Ella fumbled around in her robe pockets, her face set in reflection before she pulled out a wad of parchment, unfurling it.

"I found this on one of them — Higgs?" she hesitantly admitted. The defense instructor took up the presented parchment with narrowed eyes. His eyes scanned the page quickly before he looked at the expectant Paradors. Holding the written side for them to observe, Harry spotted a wrinkled path and scribbled words before the older wizard spoke.

"A map. Directions from the outside of the castle." Harry exhaled, upset. Wormtail had avoided capture again, this time by drawing a map instead of physically leading the recruits here. He refused to acknowledge the scoundrel could be brightening up.

"Explains the other set of stairs." Starbuck pointed out.

"What's that smell?" Ron protested, sniffing before holding his nose. "I thought we'd've been done with that!"

"It's coming from over here." Kaltag called, studying the Death Eaters' entrance. "I dunno, it's been getting stronger and stronger since we've collected them up."

"We've got to seal that entrance." Hermione reminded.

"Yes, please do!" Ron earnestly backed, waving his hand before his nose. "Cor!" Harry fixed his glasses, staring at the inquisitive red-haired Being. The Scepter was held loosely in his hand as he craned his neck around the other entry.

"If I had to guess, I'd say this leads far outside. Probably as far as the Dark Forest," he echoed slightly. "Maybe even the edge of Hogsmeade."

"How do we seal it?" Harry questioned, wand ready for duty. Kenward grunted as he stepped forward with his makeshift cane.

"I would have suggested the Implosion Spell," he began, his eyes straying skyward as the words died on his lips. "But I wouldn't risk it with those up there."

"Why?"

"They could drop down on us and kill us in a second, not to mention collapse the base of the grounds, if not the school."

"Any other suggestions?"

"Couldn't we collapse their passage way?" Starbuck proposed, propping himself on a boulder. Harry coughed; the stench was worse.

"Not without disturbing this cavern."

"Great," Kaltag grumbled as he spun around in consternation. "Where's the great Dumbledore when you need him?" The Gryffindor was about to comment wryly when he heard a fierce roar boom throughout the grotto, similar to that of a graphorn or what he thought would be a Manticore.

To Harry, it sounded much like a furious best trying to clear its congested throat; he hoped that was all it was. Starbuck and Kaltag immediately stiffened, the latter yards from the outlet as the snarl was heard. Slowly, the teenager turned to face the exit. Harry's wand was up in an instant as Ella froze once more. Kaltag's face held complete incredulity as he stared at the exit. Guttural growls echoed off of the round cave walls.

"I don't think that's Dumbledore ..." Ron winced, holding his wand ready. The professor braced himself against the boulder, brandishing the Sword in his good hand. Gradually, Kaltag tottered away from the entrance, the Scepter held level in defense. Funny enough, Harry found himself nearing the Being, but stopping short as he spotted a sinister shimmer in the shadows . . . . Two red points, brighter and more aggressive than he'd ever come across before. Another throaty growl issued.

"You'll need more than Asclepius when I'm done with you, boy!" The rumbling voice resonated. Kaltag started at the blur rushing for him; he held the Scepter in defense, backing away from the figure. Harry sought out the figure's appearance before he could fire a curse. As if his thoughts were heard, the form ceased its charging and snorted, glaring at the anxious Celestial. What he saw ... definitely explained why the cave smelled like rotted eggs and dragon carcass.

Its face was slimy, as if it was sweating oil, and resembled influences from all types of creatures, Muggle and Wizard. Its mouth was oozing and pointed, like a hard beak, with two rows of wide, sharp blackish-yellow teeth; its upper beak also melded into its snout or nose — Harry wasn't too sure what to call it — with three holes for nostrils. The ridged snout was covered with curly black hair and what looked to be tiny, sharp protrusions, like miniature horns. The narrowed diamond-shaped eyes glimmered with round pupils of hatred, disgust, and every nasty thing Harry could think of. Finally, atop its head were two hirsute ears, thin flaps resembling something

of a hare's ears; two bull horns sprouted from behind those, and what looked like stained goat horns shot out of its forehead. A complete set of parallel plates poked out of the creature's back.

It looked like a warthog-bull-dinosaur-lynx-whatever combination. Harry was sure he didn't want to know what else it was mixed with.

The five sharp claws on each hand were hard to place, and the creature was wearing aged battle armor. Despite its crossbreed nature, the beast was covered in rough scales, which Harry guessed were similar to that of a graphorn or dragon. The ... thing snorted challengingly again, its eyes glued to Kaltagonus. "We meet again." Its gravelly voice boomed. Harry thought he saw Kaltag flinch.

"Hryczuk." He uttered. Harry looked between the two in confusion. They obviously knew each other. And judging by their stances and reactions, they didn't like one another. He saw the Celestial's throat bob and the prefect straightened a bit. "Why are Hybrids here?"

"I do not answer to full-breeds." He (obviously, because its voice was deep) hissed. Harry gripped his wand carefully.

"What's Mystikos have you here for? Plan B?" The Celestial demanded, his eyes darkening in wariness. A leathery tongue emerged from the beak-snout, coating the creature's face with more saliva-ooze. Harry's face creased as Ron and Hermione made noises of disgust; he tightened his clutch on his wand.

He hissed, baring his saw-like row of uneven, pointed teeth. His red eyes spied the Scepter and he raged. "Novices! The Dark Prince will not be pleased!"

"Obviously. S'what you get when you send teenagers . . . ." Kaltag belittled. "I thought you evil types were supposed to be masterminds; can't have it all, I suppose." Hryczuk snarled, the drool oozing from his black lips. Harry doubted a simple Stunning Spell could affect the beast.

"How dare you affront the Dark Prince!"

"Mystikos couldn't find a loo if he didn't have a map." This only made the creature stomp its hoof-like feet in anger. Larger stones thumped

Harry on the head from the ceiling. "You Hybrids are just as thick as he is. Can't even get one thing right."

"Bad move, Tag," Starbuck grimaced, holding his wand uncertainly. "Very bad move ..."

"You will pay, Smythe!" The beast roared, raring its head back, and charged. Harry unfalteringly fired off a Stunning Spell, but the jet of light merely bounced off of the creature's armor. The Being moved out of the creature's way, but Kaltag's dodging victory was short-lived as Hryczuk seized a fistful of the prefect's robes in his claws and he slammed the Being of Elements to the dusty floor. Harry aimed his wand at the beast, but could not fire any spells without it harming the Being. Turning to his group of friends and his professor, they all seemed at a loss, too.

All at once, their struggling roughened, and Harry heard a sickening crack rent the air, followed by a muffled wince. Two sets of hands — rather a pair of hands and a pair of claws — gripped the Scepter as the opponents fought. Harry noticed Kenward lift Amenophus, aiming with dead accuracy at the scuffling twosome, ready to stun the beast temporarily as best he could. With horror, the seeker realized the Scepter was slipping out of Kaltag's grasp: his hands were almost off of the weapon entirely. The Ravenstone swirled angry rouge, churning with scarlet darkness.

And suddenly, another invisible ripple oscillated through the air, and a crackling beam flashed from the flaring stone and struck the ceiling.

An explosion of rock splintered above the center of the room, showering down in the midst of the cave. With the fragments came the large stalactite; the teenagers watched as the heavy cone of stone descended, piercing the ground floor in a sickening split. Harry helplessly aimed his wand at the lone rock, his eyes wide and his breath choked with dust. Thinking wasn't an option as he heard low rumbling. From experience, the seeker swallowed with realization: Rumbling was never a good sign. And low rumbling only meant something huge was about to occur.

He wasn't disappointed.

Without warning, slabs of stalactites broke from the ceiling and began to rain down on the group. "MOVE!" Kenward bellowed. Harry darted toward the wall as the group scattered, faltering slightly as the ground trembled. His robe just cleared a sharp slab, and Kenward swerved out of the way just in time. Hermione joined him, narrowly missing a small, but pointed fragment of stone.

"The Death Eaters," she panted.

"What about them?" Harry softly spat. He grabbed the witch's forearm and pulled them both out of the way of another rock. The sixth year prefect balled the arm of his robes into her fist and dragged him deftly along the wall perimeter, avoiding fatal spearing. The roar of the creature Hryczuk echoed in the distance.

"We can't let the rocks — oh!" Hermione lost her balance as Harry yanked her backward when a large cone of rock pierced the ground where Hermione's next step would have been. " — Hurt them. Thanks." She went slightly pallid before they dodged more rocks. As they approached the stairwell, it seemed nowhere was safe from the deadly rocks: The steps were perforated as well with stalactites. They settled near the undisturbed heap, watching Kenward blast stalactites to harmless rocks in midair with Amenophus. Harry screened his spectacles to search through the shower of rock for the ginger-haired Celestial.

"We need to get out of here!" Ron shouted a few yards away, shielding his head from debris. Harry nodded, pulling out his wand to move the bodies.

"Quickly." Kenward expressed, grunting with another spell. "I can't keep this up for long."

"LOOK OUT!" Ella suddenly yelled. Harry's eyes locked on her position just in time to see the witch shove Ron away from her. A stalactite collided into the spot they barely vacated. Ron seemed exceptionally ashen from the experience, and he dashed over with the witch. Harry only began to ask them if they were all right when a grimace disrupted his sentence. Eyes swung in Kenward's direction as the ground shook. Kaltag was hunched over, his breath labored and his arm hidden under his robes.



"He — he got — got away," he wheezed. "Need to — need to leave."

"How do we get up those steps with seven Death Eaters?" Harry reasoned, balancing himself with the nearby boulder. "We can't take them all." The ceiling above them fractured audibly as a rough quake shook the ground; and the seven raised their eyes to observe what was to come. More stalactites splintered, and were pointing in their area. Kenward extended his arm, shooting off as many curses as he could while the stones fell closer and closer to their destination.

Thirty feet ... Harry's mouth was dry.

Twenty feet ... His brilliant eyes met those of his distressed best friends.

Ten feet ... The Gryffindor inwardly pleaded for them to stop in time.

Harry closed his eyes tightly waiting for the impact of stone. When he felt nothing for a moment, he wondered if time truly had slowed down. A few moments later, he realized something was amiss: Was he dead? Cracking open one eye, Harry noticed Kenward first. The professor was looking behind the boulder, toward the steps. The seeker carefully opened the other orb and caught sight of Hermione and Ron, both with startled looks on their faces. Ron frantically poked at his body, pinching his cheeks and arms, and sighed in relief after his assessment was over. "Not dead. Whew! Panicked for a second, there . . . ."

He wondered if the stalactites had vanished or disappeared, but was quickly answered with a simple upward glance. Widening his bright eyes, Harry watched in surprise as the slabs hung in the air, floating as if they were harmless gravel barely a meter above them. "Wha...?" Starbuck trailed, scanning the suspended rocks. Harry looked at the group to see who had paused their progress. "So ... we aren't dead?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Smythe." A casual voice reached them from the stairwell. Harry's gaze shot around to glinting blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles.

"Headmaster!" Hermione's unnaturally high voice acknowledged. If her wan countenance was anything, it was testimony to her fears. "Glad to see you've ... made it." Harry spotted fluttered movement behind the sorcerer's majestic midnight robes, and noted Dumbledore wasn't alone. McGonagall, Chiron, and, unfortunately, Snape were also with him. Off to his side was also the very satisfied Entity of Intellect.

"Took you long enough, Nikola." Kaltag's scratchy tone jabbed.

"I thought you could handle it." She rejoined flippantly, eyeing the damage already done. "Apparently, I was mistaken."

"Can you, er, hang those somewhere else, sir?" Harry finally spoke, gesturing to the hovering stalactites. "I rather enjoy keeping my head intact."

"Pity." Snape's somber tone rang out. Harry wanted nothing more than to jinx the potion master and toss him on the pile of stunned Death Eaters. He settled for the reprimanding look Dumbledore gave the man, who looked thoroughly displeased. Professor Chiron stepped forward, his brows knit together as Dumbledore waved the floating rocks into the foreign cave entrance as a sealant.

"Takes care of that." Ron muttered, sighing gratefully. The Aripedes dignitary sauntered down the flight of broken stairs, maneuvering around the large portions of rock. His expression was impassive as he gave the twin brothers intent looks.

"Dare I ask what whirlwind adventure you sought tonight?" he neutrally inquired. The flaxen-haired Being dropped his gaze to his shoes as Kaltag struggled to stand straight. Harry didn't miss the knowing look he gave the Defense instructor before gazing at the expectant Celestial.

"Just a bit of extra credit, sir." He wryly answered. Chiron's visage remained impartial.

Dumbledore descended the staircase with Snape and McGonagall in tow. The wizened sorcerer gave a sad, long look at the mass of dark-robed bodies, his eyes lacking their usual sprightly twinkle. "Wasted youth." His dismal tone reverberated. The deputy headmistress pursed her lips, allowing her eyes to roam over the

dazed Death Eaters. Snape barely glanced in the direction of his former students, choosing instead to glare at Kenward. "Ambition blinds the common sense which keeps us at bay." He quipped with a sigh, bending slowly to identify the persons responsible. "Promises of power are now worth more than our souls. And in this war," the wrinkled wizard paused to glance at the boy with unkempt hair, "souls are everything." He flicked his wand at the throng of Voldemort's servants, and thicker, white ropes shot out of his wand to secure them efficiently.

Harry struggled not to issue a bothered sigh at the aged wizard's idioms, but found it increasingly hard as the man shook his head at the Death Eaters. "I didn't think Slytherins had — " Ron began to say, but successfully shut his mouth as Snape's glare bore into him.

"How many are there, Albus?" McGonagall asked.

"Seven." Harry responded. "There were more, but they escaped." Snape sneered surveying the damage around them with an air of displeasure.

"So much damage to a venerated cave," he silkily assessed, arching an eyebrow, "carelessness to school property. Grounds for expulsion, at best." As Hermione stiffened in fear, Harry glowered at the leer Snape produced in his direction.

"Give me a br — !"

"Mr. Smythe." Kenward grabbed his hemorrhaging shoulder, giving the red-haired Being a warning look. As he leaned forward, the clinking of Amenophus on stone drew the professors' attention. Snape appeared quite displeased with the man, and McGonagall seemed surprised. Of course Dumbledore only looked disappointed, eyeing the sword in the professor's faltering hand.

"They were after the weapons, professor," Hermione's logical tone explained. "We had to do something. We couldn't let Professor Kenward handle them on his own."

"You had the option of informing an adult, Miss Granger," Snape pressed, narrowing his obsidian orbs. "Clearly, you all wanted a chance to play hero in this exploit."

"There wasn't enough time to play hero," Kaltag spat, scowling at the smug potion master. "We did what we had to do. And we would have succeeded if you weren't so slow getting here."

"Mr. Smythe, that is enough." Chiron reprimanded. Snape looked furious at the Being's self-important rant; his nostrils expanded and his gaze darkened.

"Rest assured," Dumbledore soothed, eyeing each student and Snape alike, "there will be no expulsions served due to short notice." This relieved Hermione as she sighed gratefully, earning an amused look from Ron. The headmaster's intense eyes lingered on Harry for a moment behind those glimmering half-moon spectacles. Harry looked away in minor regret.

"Can we ... get out of here?" a small, reluctant voice broke the tension. Harry turned around to stare at the anxious Ella Burton: He'd forgotten she was there.

Dumbledore (as well as Professors Snape and McGonagall) looked quite astonished to see the new witch there: Snape masked his surprise much better than the Gryffindor Head of House. With a crinkled smile, the headmaster's eyes glimmered in their usual manner, before he nodded regally. "I believe that is an excellent suggestion, Miss Burton."

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To say Harry was less than pleased to enter the Infirmary was quite an understatement. After moving back aboveground into the castle, Harry was practically jostled into the hospital wing by Professor McGonagall. Ron and Hermione looked decidedly displeased; Ella appeared somewhat uncomfortable in the stiff, dim space.

Professor Chiron had assisted Kenward out of the cave first, and Harry assumed they were going to the Infirmary: the wing was void of life, with the exception of the last curtained cot closest to Pomfrey's office. Kaltag already took a bed and was breathing heavily. The Ravenstone Scepter hung safely around his neck, concealed in its original discovery once again. His brother sat at the edge of his bed, elbows resting on his knees. Dumbledore and Snape remained to subdue the detainees, waiting, Harry presumed, for Ministry Aurors to collect them. McGonagall departed as soon as

they entered the Infirmary, so she must have gone as an emissary to the front hall.

It wasn't long before Madam Pomfrey strode in from behind the veiled bed to see the students, robes filthy and tattered, faces unclean, and hovering around uncomfortably. A deep frown marring her face, the Mediwitch placed her hands on her hips. "I've long since given up being surprised," she began with a relentless glance in Harry's direction, "what've you children gotten yourselves into now?"

She shoved them each into separate cots and delicately held their chins in her hands to assess any disorientation or facial damage. Ron actually flinched away as she crossed the line by dabbing a cloth on her tongue and almost swiping away grime. "I have soap, thank you." He forcefully stated. Frowning, the nurse healed a few of his cuts and moved around the drape on to Harry.

"Of course, Mr. Potter." She greeted in a reduced tone of astonishment. "I expected to see you quite earlier." She muttered a spell to clean his face, afterwards taking in his ragged hands with careful practice. "Ordered a new case of Skelo-Gro just for you, actually." Harry held still as his knuckles tingled from the cold balm and Pomfrey's charm.

"Shame it'll be going to waste." He contradicted, as she applied the salve again and healed a gash on his side. He heard a genuine chuckle from the Mediwitch as she stood and yanked the frail screen aside. With a raised eyebrow, she gave him a grim smile.

"I doubt it, Mr. Potter. Now, rest."

Harry settled for sitting in the cot as the nurse fussed over Ella. "This is way too much adventure for me." He heard the witch confess. "They were right. I shouldn't've come to Hogwarts . . . ."

Ella was allowed early release with only an order to sleep at least nine hours for energy replenishment. Nikola and Hermione sat with the tense witch to appease her nerves as Pomfrey assessed Starbuck. "What a night." Ron repeated slowly, his cheeks stained with maroon blotches. Rubbing his eyes, Harry agreed, looking to his best friend. "It's not even the end of the year yet." Harry snorted,

his mind wandering back through the memories as Voldemort, ever the predictable unpredictable, would strike sometime at the end of his school year. He must have been truly desperate for the weapons to launch an attack before the holidays.

"I'm fine." He heard Kaltag mutter to the stubborn Mediwitch. His head shot up as footsteps echoed down the walkway. A few feet from Ron's cot, a tall woman with ivory robes from her chin to her feet stood with poise, her hands gripping her hips. A look of sheer skepticism graced her polished features as her sharp blue eyes settled on the Being.

"Don't believe that one." She inclined her head toward Kaltag. Harry followed her gait toward the uncooperative patient and the nurse. The ginger-haired prefect released a heavy sigh, and Harry could tell almost immediately he was stifling a grimace. "His definition of 'fine' means smarting in agony and barely as step from a boat ride with the Ferryman of Charon (1)." Persistently, the prefect straightened, his orbs hard with resolve. Madam Pomfrey appeared rather displeased with this disclosure.

"I am fine." He pressed. The women didn't look convinced: In fact, the fair-haired female scoffed, her titters a high, melodic tone. Harry was very intrigued by this unfamiliar woman.

"Four words," she held up four fingers in emphasis: "Spring of ninety-three." This, apparently, meant something, as the Being hid his eyes and groaned.

With an atmosphere of exasperation, the boy carped, "It was just that one time, Mender." Giving the teenager a wry sort of grin, the woman tilted her head and replied, "It only takes one time, Mr. Smythe." Emotions briefly stirred behind the student's eyes before he conceded defeat. Harry vaguely heard the boy hiss a string of Greek, only to be countered by the young woman's mocking response in the same language.

Nikola jerked her thumb behind her at the bed a few cots from the girls' own. "Mender Magus." She whispered in introduction. "She was the apprentice for Mender Rittenauer a few years back before she replaced him. Been on his nerves every time he's entered the hospice since then." She motioned over her shoulder to the two quarreling Celestials and the adamant Mediwitch.

"Tell me: Exactly how were you planning to hide three fractured ribs?" Mender Magus' exigent voice demanded of the grimacing Being. "Would you have come to your senses when you were on that boat?" With a scowl worthy of Professor Snape himself, the boy responded in an icy pitch, "I have my ways."

"I'd like to see you try." The young nurse dryly stated with a smile in their direction, pulling the curtains around the cot for privacy. The black-haired Gryffindor flushed somewhat at the attention, facing his friends as the light from the crescent moon set the room in cobalt radiance.

"Well I, for one, am looking forward to the Yule holidays," Nikola began, resting her head on her younger brother's shoulder. "No harebrained schemes to unravel for at least three weeks." Harry concurred with a stiff nod, rubbing the exhaustion from his eyes. His scar prickled slightly.

Hermione didn't respond as her eyes traveled along the empty cots of the Infirmary. "I wonder where Professor Kenward's gone." Shrugging in response, Harry eyed the double doors of the Infirmary, waiting for Dumbledore and the others to return and inform them about the fates of the Death Eaters. A clinking sound was heard as Madam Pomfrey tugged Kaltag's screen aside and tucked her wand away. The Being did not appear at all pleased as he shrugged his jumper on and scowled at the sheets.

"Your ribs should be healed in the next few hours. Completely by morning." The prefect only frowned, scratching the sheets with his nails. The Mediwitch turned to the students as she left the side of the Being's bed. "As for the rest of you four," she pointed directly at Harry, Ron, Hermione and Starbuck, "you are to remain here to rest for a few hours, until I release you. You may leave, Ms. Smythe." Nodding curtly to herself, Pomfrey moved back toward her office. Magus ruffled the firstborn's tresses and followed the experienced Mediwitch, pausing to wink cheerily at the students.

The seven Paradors remained quiet for a time, reflecting upon the last few hours. Harry was starting to feel the fatigue from hours of rummaging and running, and the adrenaline produced from panic and anxiety left him more worn than usual. He was rather surprised he wasn't seriously injured reminiscent of his usual year-end battles.

In fact, no one but Kenward and Kaltag needed much but a good night's rest. The bed behind him groaned as Ella stood and gave them a weak smile.

"I should go. Back to the Tower." She jerkily announced, gesturing with her hands. "Good night." Choruses of well dreams were expressed as she made her way toward the doors.

"Ella?" The witch stopped as the Paraffin called out to her tentatively. Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged bewildered looks with one another, craning their necks to see the witch by the doors.

"...Yes?" She replied in equal hesitation. Kaltagonus glanced at his sheets before meeting the girl's eyes.

"Sorry." He apologized. Harry—as well as Ella and the others—was confused. "I shouldn't have dragged you into this. I had no right." Feebly smiling, the witch shook her head.

"It's fine. Actually, I've never done anything like that before." She nervously admitted. Giving the Being a stronger smile, she took the last steps to the exit. "Breaking curfew, dueling, dashing like mad all over the school. I rather enjoyed it." Ella nodded once more before leaving for the common room. Harry noticed the obvious rosy tint on the element lord's cheeks as the doors slammed shut.

"The weapons are the least of our worries, now that we know where they are." Hermione chimed in, rubbing the bags under her eyes.

"In safe hands." Ron nodded resignedly.

"Necks." She jadedly corrected. Harry furrowed his dark brows, cradling his chin.

"What d'you think'll happen to the Death Eaters?" he questioned, honestly curious. His mind wandered back to the end of his fourth year, after the Third Task. Snape had given the fake Moody, Barty Crouch, Jr. the Death Eater, Veritaserum. Crouch had spilled everything, since he was one of Voldemort's most trusted. But Harry also knew, the lower you are in the ranks, the less information you received, and the captured group couldn't possibly have any more information than the Order of the Phoenix already knew. While Ron



and the Celestials shrugged, Hermione considered the inquiry, noticeably engrossed in finding the answer.

"Well, if Dumbledore called for the Aurors," she commenced, gazing at the seeker, "they'll obviously be sent to Azkaban. And with Fudge on a media rampage, that's exactly what's going to happen."

"He'll use them as an example to manipulate the masses into thinking he's such a good minister." Starbuck added. "With recent Death Eater captures under his belt, the public will soak it up. He'll be the frontrunner for re-election." Harry let out a sharp exhale.

"And he'll win." The Boy-Who-Lived included with a grim nod. "Who wouldn't want a minister who has detained Voldemort's servants, even if he didn't lift a wand to help?"

Ron quirked his jaw to the side to shake his head. "I don't think the wizarding world can endure another one of Fudge's terms."

Kaltag snorted from a few stiff beds away. "Be glad it isn't a monarchy." Harry had at least one thing to be grateful for.

The rustling of curtains brought the Gryffindors and Paraffins out of their respective thoughts. Harry's eyes were on the concealed bed at the end of the hospital wing. The screen was drawn back to reveal a very disappointed Mediwitch and Professor Kenward. There was a tear where his shoulder wound once bled, now heavily bandaged with gauze and resting comfortably in a sling. It wasn't hard not to notice the lustrous mustard glow of the pendant around his neck, nor the content smile that he proudly wore.

His steps echoed gently throughout the Infirmary as he made his way down the aisle. With a confident pause at the edge of Harry's bed, the younger wizard wondered what words the Defense instructor had to deliver. An amused smile played on the brown-eyed sword wielder's lips as he appraised each of his awaiting pupils. With a slight tilt of the head, the lecturer's smooth tone was just over a whisper. "Do consult me next time you feel the urge to break into my office, then?"

Harry gaped, completely thrown off by the wizard's words. Inclining his head formally, Kenward ended with a quaint, "I thank you kindly." With his last words to the speechless set, Liam Kenward's shoes

clacked quietly across the alabaster tile of the Infirmary. His cloak fluttered behind him as if radiating his own power combined with the force of the gem dangling around his neck. Harry blinked, letting out a silent breath he hadn't known he'd held. At least the professor didn't hold it against them for wrecking his office.

But Kenward halted mid-step, a few yards from the egress. Whirling to face them with a considerate smirk, he offhandedly added, "And that'll be a detention for each of you, to be served before or after Christmas break. Your choice." He grinned in triumph, raising a brow for any objections. None were made since the six stared at the heir of Youngblood with barefaced shock and disbelief.

"No objections? Have a good night's rest, Paradors."

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"Katalavenete?" – "Do you understand?"

"Katalaveno." – "I understand."

Frusto – to break to pieces.

Saxum – rock.

Evincio – to tie up; to bind.

A/N: Revised chapter.

## Chapter Twenty-One: Christmas at Themys Pallakis, Part One

Heaving a sigh, Harry squeezed a particularly fat tome between a pair of equally broad ones. Breathing sharply before standing, the Gryffindor turned to the breakfront behind him to begin his next task. The books were stacked tidily near the cabinet, awaiting reorganization.

His fingers trailed over the leathery fronts as he collected a dozen in his arms and stacked them neatly. As he bent to repeat the process with the cursed old books, his eyes caught sight of yellowed parchment. Aside from the faded images on it, there were indentations.

Stupid parchment.

Stupid journals.

Stupid Kenward.

He irreverently dropped the chronicles in the bottom drawer with distaste. "You want to be more careful with that." Kenward's casual voice startled him. The brown-eyed professor inclined his head toward the drawer. "I may need those again someday." He beamed in amusement, biting into a seasoned green apple with feeling. Harry simply scowled, adjusting the logs erratically and stooping to set up the rest.

"Right." He challenged, dumping the books despite the warning. Had Harry gauged the Defense instructor for his reaction, he would have caught the concerned expression. Leaning on the edge of his disorderly desk, Professor Kenward scrutinized the glum sixth year tidying his office mechanically.

"Sickle for your thoughts." his soft voice breached the thick atmosphere. Harry set out to straighten the books in the drawer, acknowledging Kenward with a low grunt. "Harry."

"Nothing's wrong." The older wizard furrowed his brows.

"By the way you're manhandling my books, I'd say something is definitely the matter."

"I'm fine."

"Quite the contrary, I'd say." Harry slammed the drawer shut and gave the professor a withering look. Swallowing his irritation, the Gryffindor moved toward the door. "I didn't give you permission to leave, Mr. Potter." Harry halted in his gait, barely a step over the threshold.

"I didn't come here to be analyzed," he hissed, clenching his fists at his sides. "I'm here for detention." Turning on his heel to give the wizard a hard look, the teenager tightened his lips before addressing the worried man. "But I'll tell my therapist you cared." Giving the sardonic boy a knowing look, Kenward inclined his head with pursed lips.

"Do tell: I'd love to hear their opinion of your behavior. The way you're considering those journals, I'd say you need a reminder for why you are here in the first place." He remarked calculatingly. Harry did not speak, but took another step out of the office.

"Mr. Potter ..." Came Kenward's cautionary tone.

"Are you sure?" The seeker blurted out, facing the instructor. By his fierce eyes and determined countenance, Kenward knew the boy was angry.

"What?"

Pausing to work his jaw, Harry looked at the floor before finding the professor's eyes. "I said, are you sure?" Shaking his head slightly, the teacher settled his suspended arm in a more comfortable state before he considered the question.

"I'm afraid I'm not following you, Harry." Narrowing his eyes, the Boy-Who-Lived squeezed his lips together before sighing. The answers in the cave were clear, but they just seemed wrong. There had to be another reason for this. Focusing his gaze on the inkwell on Kenward's desk, Harry breathed deeply before he spoke.

"Are you sure you're not the Child of Phoenix?" Kenward gave him a strange look, blinking as if he'd grown another head. Harry waited on edge as the lecturer had yet to reply. After all, no response almost always meant that someone was, in fact, the accused. So, of

course the blood had to be a mistake. It may have been a complex spell, but he understood, Kenward had to keep his identity . . . .

Thinning his eyes into rapt slits, the professor set his fruit blindly aside and regarded the steadfast Gryffindor. "Do you want me to be?" He slowly inquired. Harry opened his mouth to answer, but found himself flexing his jaw instead.

It was a simple enough question. And his answer was simple: yes. But the connection between his brain and his mouth was, for the moment, obstructed. Kenward's searching eyes didn't help matters any more than his question did. Harry froze, staring at the worn stone floor. The threads on his robe were, at present, more interesting than the Defense professor's penetrating gaze.

"What do you want me to tell you, Harry?" he inquired, thinning his eyes slightly. That you are, the Gryffindor inwardly fussed. That my life isn't dictated by the Child and this prophecy . . . .

Lowering his brows at Harry's pause and lack of response, the russet-eyed wizard quirked his mouth to a low corner. As Harry continued to fidget without an answer, he struggled to understand the boy's reaction. "Why is it so important to you that I be this Child?"

Again Harry paused in his toying, before he frowned. Reluctantly meeting the man's inquisitive gaze, the teenager sighed deeply. "Because ... because ... I don't want to be him ... or her." It felt awkward to finally admit his worry aloud.

All of his friends, and even the school looked at him as if he were the Child. As if he didn't have enough to worry about with just being the Boy-Who-Lived, but to add 'Blesséd Child Phoenix' to his list of aliases? Harry would no sooner adopt Peter Pettigrew as his guardian than add another burden to his load. Stroking his goatee between calloused fingers, Kenward nodded.

"Ah, I see." Shrugging lightly, the professor gave Harry a sad look. "I must say Mr. Potter, you've a decent chance of being ..." Youngblood's heir suddenly paused, creasing his brows. Raising his eyebrows moments later, he lowered his slender fingers to the quartz crystal shimmering behind him, his eyes holding an apologetic gleam. "Actually, you've a perfect chance of being the

Child of Phoenix." His eyes glimmered in amusement at the boy's theatrical groan. "As much as the next witch or wizard or Celestial here. I'd love nothing more than to end this voyage."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Harry released a rough sigh. "Would that be so bad?" Kenward questioned. Grimly looking at his professor, Harry lightly scowled. "You have no idea." The seeker replied. With a faint chuckle, Kenward pushed himself off the edge of his desk, approaching the Gryffindor with an encouraging smile. Placing a hand on the almost level boy's shoulder he inclined his head once.

"Well, I can't help you there, Potter," his hand left his shoulder to bury themselves at the neck of his robes. Harry caught the wintry blue glow from the matted crystal around his neck. "But know that whatever your destiny may hold," sharp eyes held firmly to his orbs, "don't fight it." Harry furrowed his brows. With an experienced guise, Kenward nodded in his direction. "Embrace it."

Nodding raggedly, Harry briefly met Kenward's eyes before he began to move back toward the cabinet. "Don't mind," the professor interrupted before he could bend. "You've done quite enough already." With a slow nod, Harry blushed somewhat, eyeing the cabinet of files.

"Sorry about before," he apologized. "With the journals and all." Kenward waved him off, taking his apple once more betwixt his fingertips.

"That's the most action they've seen in their entire lifetime. Something other than page flipping." He nonchalantly admitted, sinking his teeth into the apple and chewing quickly. "They're bound to split their seams one day. Go on. You're done." Harry gave the man an acknowledging nod before heading out of the office. Before he could turn down the stairway, Harry paused at the landing to face Kenward again. With crinkled brows, the Gryffindor considered the instructor.

"Professor," he tentatively began, "do you think you'll ever find the Child of Phoenix?"

The Defense wizard halted in his nibbling to furrow his brows. Harry's hands found themselves in his pockets, waiting for a

response. Kenward seemed quite cheerless, but thoughtful to this query, and several times he moistened his lower lip. With a bleak grin in the Gryffindor's direction, the professor gazed at the quartz crystal on his desk. "I will journey until I am unable. And if I do not succeed, then will I pass the torch I've kept lit for so long. You're dismissed, Harry." The Gryffindor left the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom without a backward glance.

Harry buttoned his cloak quickly as he felt the bitter chill of December. His freezing hands wormed their way into his robe pockets, brushing his wand and a rough wad. The torches dimly lit his passage as he gruffly brushed the crumpled parchment aside and his mood curdled. This week had certainly been taxing.

The six students occupied three cots as they counted the hours until they were allowed released. Ron had taken refuge on Harry's cot, lying on his back with his forearm covering his eyes; Hermione, Nikola, and Starbuck sat on the next one. Kaltag was unusually quiet, scowling at the starched linens.

Madam Pomfrey and Mender Magus were busying themselves with the linen cupboard, scarcely eyeing the silent teenagers in the wing. Harry barely lowered his elbows to his knees before the door to the wing groaned quietly. Ron shifted to sit on the bed as everyone turned to face the visitors.

Dumbledore entered the wing with a somber expression, flanked by McGonagall, Snape and Headmaster Chiron. McGonagall and Chiron looked utterly displeased, as her lips were in the thinnest of lines. Snape was bordering on smug and disillusioned, as his obsidian gaze scanned the group.

"Know that I will be informing Professor Thetis," Chiron began, regarding the Celestials in disapproval, "and your father." Nikola and Starbuck stiffened at the last sentence, their brown eyes wide with horror. Kaltag merely looked annoyed.

"And your families will also be notified," added McGonagall, adjusting her tartan cloak. "And thirty points will be taken from Parador." Ron sucked in a breath, and Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye that the keeper was steadily turning purple. Dumbledore hadn't spoken, but he appraised each sixth year gravely.

His solemn blue eyes alighted on the alleged ringleader, of course, making the unruly-haired student uncomfortable. Chiron and McGonagall regarded the students for a moment before they turned to leave. Snape gave them all a look of abhorrence before he spun on his heel, cloak billowing like dark clouds behind him.

As the door was opened and closed once more, Dumbledore raised his chin in Harry's direction. "A word, Mr. Potter," he spoke, his blue eyes void of their accustomed twinkle. Harry suddenly felt as if he were eleven years old again, being sent to the headmaster's office for punishment. "In my office. Follow me." His formal tone left no room for dispute. With a flopping stomach and sweaty hands, Harry stood, avoiding the concerned looks of his friends. He followed Dumbledore out of the Infirmary, leaving Madam Pomfrey to sputter her indignation after their echoing footsteps.

The trek to the stone gargoyle took an unnaturally short amount of time, due to the lack of conversation between the two powerful wizards. Harry didn't even hear the white-bearded wizard speak the password to his office, but was startled when he heard the revolving staircase begin to move. Jumping on an ascending step, Harry stumbled awkwardly before he balanced himself.

Dumbledore advanced with the stairway, moving calmly to the door of his office. Harry kept his gaze on the floor as he walked in behind the headmaster, irritation bothering him greatly. Out of the six of them, he gets into trouble? Sure, their families were going to receive letters home, but what would the Dursleys care? If anything, they'd be displeased the tremor didn't finish him off.

A low trill came from the exotic creature that appeared quite smaller than Harry remembered it, but the student realized he must have had a Burning Day a few weeks prior. The portraits of past school leaders were silent, as most were snoozing in their frames.

The aged headmaster circled his desk as Harry stood defiantly between the visitors' chairs. Setting himself down in his ornate throne, the wizard lifted an age-spotted hand to the chairs. "Sit down, Harry." It wasn't an offer. Harry tightened his jaw and sharply sat down. Neither spoke for a spell, before Harry sighed sharply. He knew the game Dumbledore was playing: He wanted Harry to speak first.



"What, no tea?" the seeker lightly scorned. "Run out of lemon drops?" Dumbledore merely steepled his fingers before his unsmiling visage, peering at him over his half-moon spectacles. "I take it you've another large surprise to drop on me." Still, the headmaster didn't answer. Harry was getting frustrated. Crossing his arms in annoyance, the teenager narrowed his eyes.

"Your silence is reassuring. What is it this time, sir? Are you demanding an assigned date for when I must battle Voldemort? Or maybe, I dunno, you're going to tell me the Dursleys are really wizards whose main goal all these years was to prepare me for psychological warfare?"

Dumbledore unblinkingly surveyed the teenager. "Harry—" his tone was warning.

"Or wait: there's another relative of mine out there that you've kept from me." The headmaster lifted his head slightly before his tone was pleading.

"Harry ...."

With a dark smile, Harry shook his head at the former professor. "No, I've got it: I'm promised to a lovely Hufflepuff by way of predetermined contract of arranged marriage. Let me guess: signed by Minister Fudge himself?"

"Harry, there is nothing else left to tell you." Dumbledore spoke before the boy could interrupt. Harry only narrowed his eyes some more.

"Are you sure, or are you just saving the interesting news until someone else dies, or comes close to it?" he bitterly hissed. Something wavered in the Order leader's eyes as he lowered his meditative hands.

"There is nothing else." He tightly pronounced. "You must believe me—"

"I'M TIRED OF BELIEVING YOU!" Harry roared, his brows gathered in fury.

Dumbledore issued a deep sigh before settling back into his armchair. His blue eyes expressed a touch of hurt at the Gryffindor's confession. There were few throat clearings and yawns as a few portraits were crudely awakened by Harry's tone. Few rudely reproached him, but Harry could care less.

Exhaling sharply, Harry glared at the contrite sorcerer. "I don't trust you anymore." He admitted indignantly. "You may tell me some things that you discuss with the Order, but you still don't tell me everything."

Sighing gravely, the elder wizard folded his hands. "You are not a member of the Order."

"I'm the reason the Order exists." He retorted, piercing the man with his furious gaze. "You're here to help me find a way to defeat Voldemort, and I've yet to be given a sliver of information from any of you to assist me."

"You're still a ch—"

"I am NOT a child!" Harry's voice rose once more as anger reared within him. Who was Dumbledore to insult him so? Harry Potter was anything but a mere child. He vaguely heard the portrait of Armando Dippet rebuke his attitude. "Children don't overthrow dark lords and fear for their lives. Children aren't expected to save an entire race, even world!"

"Nevertheless," the sharp tone of Dumbledore thundered gently, "you are still a student, and I will not compromise your—"

"It's already been compromised." He scowled. "Every year it's compromised. I'd say we've long since reached a parting of the ways ourselves." Harry closed his eyes to placate his tingling scar. His mouth was dry from arguing, and he felt he couldn't look Dumbledore in the eyes after his last statement. "What happened to the Death Eaters?" He broached the subject. He opened his eyes to view Dumbledore's intertwined fingers in front of his stiff longhaired chin.

"They were enervated and given small doses of Veritaserum," he confirmed Harry's assumption. "But they knew nothing of Voldemort's or Mystikos' impending schemes."

"They were recruits, then?" Harry turned away to glare at the shiny trinkets on the repaired shelves. "Expendable followers?"

Dumbledore stiffened at the statement, but inclined his head before he replied, "Yes. Aurors from the Order were dispatched to formally confine them." Tense stillness reigned over the office, broken only by the mutterings of the portraits. Harry's eyes darted from the shelf to the dark window, displaying the moon shrouded by clouds. "Harry," the revered headmaster tentatively began. "I understand you are upset at the moment—"

Harry snorted derisively at the understatement, but kept his gaze on the window. "—But it is clear to me that you had visions from Voldemort which led to tonight's encounter." Right away, Harry could tell where this conversation was leading. "If you will not come to me following the occurrence of a foresight, I must advise you: it would be best for you to continue Occlumency with Professor Snape."

Harry shut his eyes for a minute, inwardly rolling them. "I can't exactly use remedial potions as a cover anymore, sir." He bitingly replied. His intense look menaced the headmaster. "Furthermore, I refuse to be taught by Snape." Dumbledore's cornered upturned in a faintly grim smile.

"Professor Snape." He corrected.

"I'm quite sure he would rather not have me as his responsibility." The teenager resumed with a hard face. "He'd rather yank his teeth out with a Wrenching Charm."

"Harry ..." the sorcerer's threatening pitch began.

Harry knit his brows together. "I will not take up Occlumency again, sir." His firm tone left little room for argument. "I'm not going through his insults again."

Heaving an oppressive sigh, Harry thought Dumbledore appeared more weathered than he did a few seconds before. "Very well, Mr. Potter." Harry allowed himself a tiny smile of triumph as Dumbledore steepled his fingers once more.

Harry had gone back to the common room that night to find Neville and Seamus playing Exploding Snap. When he had asked if they had felt anything odd through the night, he was stunned by their negative responses.

Harry wondered just how far underground they were for the castle not to feel the tremor from the Hollows. He joined the two, waiting for the rest of his partners to arrive from the Infirmary. When the two questioned his tattered and filthy garments, Harry only grunted in response. They wisely left him alone.

As expected, he didn't sleep particularly well that night, as his scar angrily burned. Wrapped in the knitted blankets, Harry briefly glimpsed furious blood-red eyes in his restless dreams, waking up periodically with a stabbing throbs.

Only Kaltag remained in the Infirmary the next morning. From what he understood, no one in the castle felt the upheaval from the cave skirmish. The seven students kept quiet about that fateful Friday evening, only waiting in fretfulness to hear from their parents. As it was, Parador only lost thirty points from the midnight romp, and the sixth and seventh years were confident they would regain the points from the upcoming Quidditch match.

Harry's fingers absently brushed the balled up parchment in his pocket. Sighing wearily, he pulled out the yellowed paper and looked at it with annoyance. Of course, Ron had received a splenetic letter from his parents, expressing their disappointment but relief that he was all right.

They made sure to ask about Hermione and Harry's well being. Mr. and Mrs. Granger's letter arrived just yesterday, not exactly surprised with their daughter's adventures, but warning Hermione to be more careful. The Smythes told them their father delivered a short oPost on their oLinks, and later a brief correspondence stating his dissatisfaction with the triplets.

"Can you imagine?" Kaltag incredulously protested, yanking the chain around his neck. "He was upset with us for protecting the weapons! He should talk! He gave me the scepter knowing full well that I could've been KILLED for having it!"

Of course, the Dursleys were informed. And Harry was right to doubt they wouldn't bother to send a note about his behavior. He expected that. What he didn't expect was the scathing letter from his godfather.

The Quidditch seeker tapered his eyes at the wrinkled parchment in his hand, remembering the railroading notice his father's best friend sent him. From what he remembered, Sirius was angry that he threw himself into danger ("This from the man who told me to 'have an adventure' this year!" He grouched earlier to Ron). He was most displeased that none of them informed the Order of the Phoenix of Voldemort's plans, and that he'd dragged his friends into peril knowing they were possibly outnumbered.

At this, the teenager released a mirthless sigh: Sirius was one to be condemning him; after all, didn't the Marauders create similar debacles for themselves? Harry felt little concern for any group associated with Dumbledore; he thought he was rightly justified by not informing the Order. He received more direct information from Voldemort himself than the Order would ever tell him.

But Harry wasn't only upset with Sirius' concern. He was most upset with what else Sirius had stated. His fist damaged the parchment more as he repeated the lines over and over in his mind.

"Though not because of your jaunt, I must tell you that I will not be able to make it for Christmas. I'm sure you realize what other priorities I must accomplish, but perhaps you can still stay there and spend time with the Weasleys? I'm quite sure you'll find something harmless to busy yourself with. Jinxing Kreacher behind his back has always kept me entertained."

Harry had shut himself behind the hangings of his four-poster and stuffed Sirius' mirror deeper into his trunk. He refused to speak to the Animagus, or even reply to his letter. All he wanted was to spend another good Yule holiday with his godfather. Granted, last year's holiday was fraught with forced cheerfulness and near tragedy, but it was a holiday away from Hogwarts all the same.

Harry couldn't bear to spend Christmas in the castle, so close to Dumbledore. He had yet to keep eye contact with the headmaster since their conversation that night. Harry had also ruled out

Grimmauld Place; the Weasleys may be there, but he didn't want to risk running into Dumbledore again.

With a saddened breath, Harry shoved the balled up notice into his robes and set up the stairs with a clear head. After all, it wouldn't be wise to practice Quidditch with a preoccupied mind and a pair of loose bludgers.

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". . . Really brilliant the way you caught the snitch at the end there, Harry." Ron praised the seeker for the sixteenth time that night. With a slightly green face, the keeper grimaced into his butterbeer bottle. "Real close, that game was. If it wasn't for you, we would've lost it." Harry nodded automatically, taking a swig from his own frothy drink.

"Right." Was his mechanical response to the phrase he'd heard too many times from his best friend. Nodding to the fire, Ron nursed his drink with dull eyes.

"Because—"

"Hufflepuff played so fiercely today." Harry finished monotonously, settling brusquely into the couch. "I know." He gave the prefect an obvious look as Ron distractedly nodded. And for what was the hundredth time that evening, a different Gryffindor paused, gave them a strange look, and continued to join the revelry.

Of course, few were worried that the co-captains tediously sat before the warming fire as the rest of the house celebrated Gryffindor's narrow victory, 200 to 140. The Badgers were merciless in today's match, with the fed up Smith as their captain. The horrible irony of it was Ron had managed to block most of their shots. Gryffindor managed a handful of goals while the Hufflepuffs pulled amazing upsets.

Harry tightly shut his eyes as the Gryffindors and Paraffins brashly celebrated today's victories in both houses, as Paraffin also trounced the Voltaire Lemurs. It was amazing McGonagall hadn't come in more often, as the noise grew steadily more unbearable. A weary figure flopped into the armchair beside his with a barely audible sigh. Ginny gave the young co-captain a tired grin before barely stifling a yawn.

"I think they're celebrating for today's games and the last time we played," she suggested with a look at the revelers. "Good thing we've got a break until March." Harry toasted to that note and quaffed some of his drink. The chaser absently nodded to herself and joined them to gaze at the leaping flames. "Today's victory was an early gift, I'd say."

"Hm."

There was considerable silence between the three of them before a fourth joined their group. Hermione sat down beside Ron and pulled a textbook and parchment from her rucksack. "You'd think we'd just liberated the house elves with the way they're whooping back there." She missed the strange looks the trio of Quidditch players bestowed on her before she snapped her book open with a huff.

"How was detention?" Harry thought to ask.

"More tolerable than this." She distastefully nudged her head at their boisterous housemates. "I found a few fascinating books on Defense as I organized Professor Kenward's shelves." Ron shook his head.

"Only you would find a way to make detention productive." He conveyed with an incredulous façade.

"Are you staying here for Yule, Ron?" Ginny smoothly mentioned, swilling her butterbeer. A sickened look crossed the flame-haired prefect's face as he leaned back into his seat.

"Might as well, we've no other place to go. Mum wrote that Percy is 'considering' coming over for Christmas dinner. With a guest." He disclosed with disapproval. "They haven't ruled him out. Bill and Charlie may not make it." Ginny nodded and sipped her beverage.

The redhead turned his attention to the dark-haired wizard. "Are you going back to Snuffles' place, then? Thinking we might join you." A frown deeply creasing his face, Harry shook his head. He thought he'd stay with the Weasleys, but if they weren't staying at the Burrow, he probably had to stay at Hogwarts (much to his chagrin).

"He isn't going to make it this year. He's working for Dumbledore." Harry shoved the bottle to his face to curtail any inquiries.

"My parents wanted me to spend the holidays with them, but with N.E.W.T.s coming up ..."

"In less than two years," Ron argued with an incredulous look. The witch ignored him to eye his younger sister.

"How are O.W.L. preparations so far?" Ginny winced somewhat before frowning.

"Dismal," she replied. "I can't seem to get an Outstanding from anyone."

"Well, at least you don't get P's." Ron grumbled. Harry agreed, glaring at the ball of parchment that walloped him in the back of his head. The dark figures partying were all a multihued blur; with their backs to him, he couldn't tell which one was the culprit. Their easy conversation about next weekend's Hogsmeade visit was ultimately broken by the arrival of the Entity of Intellect and her older brother. Nikola sat down as her brother occupied the arm of her chair.

After a quick glance directed toward the loud cluster, the Being looked at the clever Gryffindor. "Are they always this rowdy?"

"You've never thrown parties after your matches?" Ron looked scandalized when the Being shook his head. "Blimey, you haven't lived . . . ."

"I'm assuming with all of tonight's festivities, you won't be having a Christmas party, then." At the mention of Christmas, Harry frowned again.

"Harry," began a concerned Nikola, smiling brightly afterward. "Why the long face? I'd think you'd be quite proud of yourself today."

Shaking his head with a forced smile, he held the Celestial's brown eyes. "No, it isn't that, I ... I just," he paused, staring at the roaring fire. "I think I'll be staying here for Christmas, is all. Snuff ... Black is out of town." He whispered in an undertone. The two understood, despite his near slip.



"That's too bad." The Being offered with a slight frown. His eyes darted around the room to the Paradors and the fire, before he cocked his head to the side. His eyes brightened as he settled them on the baffled Gryffindor. "Say, why don't you come stay with us for Christmas?" He gave the wizard an awkward smile. Beside him, Nikola's face broke into a beam as she ardently nodded at Hermione.

Harry's eyes widened slightly as his brows slowly lowered. He would have loved to be anywhere but Hogwarts and a Black-less Grimmauld Place. "Oh, well ..." his emerald eyes absently drifted toward his best friends. They appeared vaguely put out. "I ... wouldn't want to be a burden."

Kaltag rolled his eyes and waved him off. "The four of you? A burden? You're anything but." Harry brightened somewhat at the mention of four invitations. The Paraffin crossed his arms and propped himself on his sister. "I'm sure father wouldn't mind. The more people, the—"

"More I get to spend!" The Entity excitedly interrupted with a squeal. Ginny and Hermione faintly grinned at her girlish enthusiasm.

"...Merrier." Her brother ended with a look of distaste in her direction. "It definitely won't be dull around the house this Christmas. Besides, we haven't had Christmas guests since ..." the prefect, furrowed his brows in reflection. Shaking his head and shrugging, he concluded with, "Ever."

Harry considered the Being's proposal as he gazed at the bottle clutched in his hand. "You live on Olympus?" Ginny queried with bright eyes. With a negative shake of the head, Kaltag toyed with Nikola's jumper.

"Greece. Athens." He corrected. Ginny's brows were lost in her vivid fringe.

"That's a long walk from here. How would we get there?" Again, the student frowned as the sixth years and chaser looked to him expectantly.

"I'm not sure," Nikola answered. "I think we're taking your train."

"To the platform?" Harry skeptically answered. "Wouldn't make much sense if you live in Greece. What, will we be trading transports, then?"

"A good number of Aripedes' students live in England, Scotland, and Ireland, so it's convenient for them. I know those living on Olympus will be taken by the carriages." Kaltag nibbled on his nails between thoughts. "I know Belle and Gen are switching trains once they reach King's Cross, and Orrin's taking an aircraft to Cape Town, but what do we do?" His brows wrinkled deeply.

"Air-craft?" Ron questioned in confusion.

"Have you asked Icarus?" Nikola asked. Kaltag eyed the batch of celebrating Paradors and shook his head, entering in conversation with his twin sister. Hermione grinned in wonder as she faced the black-haired teenager.

"I've read all about Greece's history," she started in her instructing tone. "So much history is buried in its ruins. I can't wait to visit the ruins of the Acropolis...!" Harry didn't share her enthusiasm; he merely wanted to be away from Hogwarts. Ron's countenance sagged with bewilderment as he turned to Harry with interest.

"What's an 'air-craft?'"

"I guess that means we're going, then?" Ginny acknowledged in amusement. Harry swigged the last of his frothy beverage as Hermione went on to discuss the intricate types of columns found at the Parthenon.

"...Isn't like we can exactly drive across Europe to Athens," Kaltag tartly opposed his sister as she scowled.

"Then we'll go to Aristedes and figure it out from there."

"That defeats the whole purpose of taking the train when we can book a carriage." He countered cheekily.

"Mind you, the carriage ride would be much longer, and more cramped." She highlighted impatiently.

The noise from the partying Paradors, the bickering siblings, and Hermione's ramblings were grating on the seeker's nerves. His head was steadily beginning to twinge as Ron asked what an aircraft was for the third time.

"We accept," Harry raised his voice in irritation, silencing the nattering sixth years, "your invitation. Right?" He glowered at the others, who quickly nodded. "I'm sure they'll inform us of the transport options to make it there." The Celestials grinned contently and relaxed once more as the crowd of Quidditch fanatics cheered and yammered raucously.

So they would be spending the holidays in Greece. Away from Percy, away from Hogwarts: Away from Sirius. Harry sighed brokenly. It was for the best. He didn't want to spend a melancholy and tense Yule without Sirius and with temperamental Weasleys. No matter how many times he repeated the excuse to himself, he felt more saddened. Another ball of parchment and glittery paper sailed in his direction, but ended up dousing Ginny's arm.

The redhead shot up with an angry look and stalked over to the group as Harry nestled deeper into the cushions. Harry barely closed his eyes against the fiery-haired witch's harangue before he felt a hesitant tap from Ron. Opening his questioning eyes to the pink-eared prefect, Harry raised his brows in an expectant gesture.

"What's an air-craft?"

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He bit his bottom lip in frustration as a bitter wind swept through the dark skylight. He could have sworn this was déjà vu. Harry closed his eyes and bowed his head to the floor, shaking it in lack of success. And of course, there was the proverbial deep sigh from him.

"You're supposed to be growing plants here, not waving at them." Came the aggravating tone of the Being of Elements. "Trust me, they don't wave back." The prefect emphasized with derisively wagging his hands. He glanced at the Celestial out of the corner of his eye to view his slumped posture. Clenching his fists, Harry inhaled before he lost his temper.

"I tried. It wasn't enough."

"Yeah, and we've got a concert to get to." He gestured sarcastically to his wristwatch.

"I've just got a lot on my mind." Which was the truth. He'd been surprised to receive post from his ill-treating relatives in Surrey, asking if he dared to think he would set foot in Number Four for the holidays. Harry did something he never attempted before.

He sent a smug message with a school owl telling them 'his people' were vacationing in Greece for the winter, and that he'd send them a postcard. He was quite sure that would make his uncle's face purple with fury.

Besides the Defense Associations and Trelawney's revamped predictions of his horrific demise, Harry was starting to feel the strain of post-O.W.L./pre-N.E.W.T. homework. The teachers insisted on overloading them with pre-holiday work, as well as essays during the holidays: Especially the potions master. Harry also noticed sharp looks from McGonagall every time he had her class; apparently, she had seen the marks from his last few potions essays. And he was sure she knew 'P' didn't stand for 'Perfect.'

But his mind didn't linger for long on his relatives or his classes. It heavily weighed on when next seeing his godfather. If he survives this mission, he mused dolefully. He had sent the Animagus a brief letter informing him of his holiday plans days before. Harry sincerely hoped Sirius wouldn't be disappointed with his decision.

"Well, duh," the Being scorned, suspending his thoughts. Harry glared at the Paraffin. "Wouldn't've noticed because everything looks so green and boring." Harry huffed to himself, leaning on the workbench with crossed arms. "You know we aren't leaving until you get this right."

"You'll miss your sister's solo." Harry pointed out brightly.

"So? I know what her voice sounds like. I've heard her sing before." Harry narrowed his eyes. He didn't want to be stuck in here with the Celestial all night. He was beginning to rethink his decision to accept Kaltag's invitation to his house. If this was how it was going to be, he would take his chances with Grimmauld Place. But as it was, they were leaving tomorrow morning.

A deep sigh was heard from the top Celestial student. "Remember what I told you: Don't think of what you want; pretend you already have it. Say it aloud if you need to." Harry continued to stare at his trainers. He heard a rough sigh and a faint jingling noise. "I'll throw in the Scepter if you get it right." The Paraffin sing-songed, waving the necklace back and forth.

Rolling his eyes, Harry pushed himself off the table with a slight smirk. "I don't want that."

"Neither do I, but we can't all have what we want, now can we?" A wry grin creased the Gryffindor's face as he raised his face to the sky. Narrowing his eyes at the thick, dark outline, Harry concentrated on what he was supposed to accomplish. Harry felt a slight rush of frustration, wondering why it was difficult at times for him to channel his new ability.

It wasn't as if it was Occlumency or spell-work, something that took complete concentration and focus; this was something to be done flippantly, without thought or care as to what needed to be accomplished. He honestly wondered why he hadn't had a strong grasp of it by now. Brushing the thoughts to the side, he focused on the present task.

I'll have a good Christmas, he determinedly thought to himself as he raised his hand skyward. And Sirius will be fine. He'll be back for the New Year, right? Moistening his lips, Harry furrowed his brows and took a shallow breath, feeling the familiar warmth from within.

"Vine!" he called out. Loud groaning was heard as well as rustling. He firmly kept his hand raised as he felt something rough brush his fingers. Something cold and sinewy but coarse slithered snugly into his palm and coiled itself loosely around his wrist. He felt soft sprouts shoot out between his fingers and the rustling paused.

Snapping his head determinedly to the large clay pot on the table in front of him, Harry tapered his eyes at the tub with strength of mind. More rustling was heard, but this time it was quick and jumbled. A loud crack pierced the silence before the whispering plants ceased.

Harry only heard the sharp breaths escape from his mouth as silence enveloped the greenhouse. Out of the corner of his right eye,

he spotted a ball of light growing in intensity, illuminating the entire greenhouse. Kaltag approached with his wand out, surveying the scene.

Harry's eyes quickly sought out the vine of snapdragon twisting around his wrist and the bits of red clay debris on the table, scattered around the coil of snapdragon. With a satisfied nod, the Being smirked.

"Nicely done." He praised with something akin to sincere pride. "Now you can crush your enemies and swing away from the scene of the crime." The Olympian's eyes smoldered bright emerald in the wandlight as he inclined his head at Harry's wrist. The vine obediently slipped away as the boy's gaze landed on him. "You try." He gestured to the thick coil on the table. Harry was startled only for a moment before he furrowed his brows at the helix.

"Up." He commanded the crushing spiral. Very slowly, the twist of snapdragon unfurled as it ascended skyward.

"You're doing better than I expected." Harry beamed with satisfaction, wiping the snow on his palm into his robes. "Maybe next time, we can begin travel." Kaltag walked toward the exit, holding it open for the confused wizard following closely behind.

"Travel?" he questioned in perplexity, wrapping his scarf tightly around his neck.

"Melding with the ground or foliage. It's a form of camouflage, but it's also great when you need to get around without being seen." Harry's confused face must have given him away as they curved around Greenhouse One, trudging in the ankle deep snow. Sighing exasperatedly, the Being raised his brows to call for his attention. He paused a few feet before the wizard and motioned for him to halt. "Like so: Now you see me—" Harry merely raised a brow and sighed as the Being mimicked his pose. Batting his eyes the Being smirked before ... he disappeared.

Harry blinked, flitting his eyes to the foot-imprinted spot where the Paraffin stood and the snow-covered knolls around him. Where was he? Harry uncrossed his arms and felt his brows furrow in bewilderment. What happened? "Kaltag?" he called out uncertainly. His eyes swung to the illumined, frosted windows of the castle, and

the dark sky. The Gryffindor was starting to eye the forest in the distance suspiciously when —

"— But then, you didn't." An amused tone broke through his panicked thoughts. Harry whirled around to glare at the content prefect, but failed miserably. The Celestial show-off grinned against the icy wind. "Hence, traveling."

Harry's mouth worked, odd noises popping from his throat as he tried to speak. "How — how'd you ... when — ?"

"I passed under you. Underground." He began, starting back up the hill. "I became the dirt, the grass, the ... whatever else is under the snow." He explained to the baffled Gryffindor.

"But I don't—"

"I can't explain it." He shook his head in frustration. "It's like you and nature become one. There's no absolute you, and there isn't an absolute nature; the lines between the two are blurred. It's..." he frowned to himself. "Hard to put into words." Harry nodded in consideration, balling his fists and shoving them in his robes for warmth.

"D'you do it often?" The boy shook his head.

"No. It's draining." He gave a rough sigh. "I can travel in all my elemental forms, except for sun. It's faster through fire and electricity. Water is all right, too, but I rarely travel as water." The thin-eyed wizard creased his brows at the terse tone in which the Being ended. It seemed there was more he wasn't telling him. Intrigued, Harry held back a curious smirk.

"Why?"

Harry took it as a good sign when the Being faltered in his step, visibly hesitating as they climbed the hill. "I leak." His cheeks colored in humiliation in the weak light. Harry crinkled his brows, offering the Being a puzzled look. This caused the embarrassed Celestial to exhale sharply. "You're lucky we're friends, Harry." He spoke in warning. "If I ignore my other forces and only used my water element for a full day, without the balance in between, I ..." he hesitated, darting his eyes around for imaginary eavesdroppers. "I'll

wake up the next morning in a thoroughly soaked ... mattress." Harry's brows were lost in his fringe.

"You ... wet the bed?" The Being glared at the Gryffindor's amused tone.

"Not in that crude sense, but my forces sort of ... I dunno, come loose when I'm completely exhausted. If I'm not careful when I relax, they move freely. Especially water." Harry stifled his snicker at the expense of the Being's discomfort. "It's usually only with water, though. Luckily it isn't with fire or electrical energy. One time I woke up half buried in dirt." His face contorted at the memory.

"But the water thing only happens once in a while. Hasn't happened this year." He tried to smooth over the confession. Harry still smirked at the Being. Glowering at the leering seeker, the Greek prefect idly kicked a patch of snow as the frosty wind flushed their visible cheeks.

"So, you plan on telling Hermione and Ron about your abilities anytime soon?" Harry frowned at the Being's triumphant smirk.

"No."

"Oh, you're an optimistic one."

"I can't tell them." He breathed, staring at the visible puff of air in front of him. "Ron'll get jealous, and Hermione'll clear out the library with every book about my 'condition'. I don't want that." Harry narrowed his eyes at the surrounding white mounds.

"Yes, I was mistaken." The Celestial drawled. "Only friends care. Won't make that assumption again."

Harry furrowed his brows. "And they'll be in even more danger than they already are." He waspishly stated. "Then they'll be upset that you knew and they didn't." As the Celestial turned to him, Harry could see a faint, dogged grin in the fading light.

"Knew what?" he innocently replied. The Gryffindor thinned his vivid eyes into slits, shaking his head menacingly.

"Oh, no, don't play that game with me."



"If I don't know anything," the student artfully began, "they can't be mad at both of us." He gave the fellow housemate a roguish grin. "Standard scapegoat procedure, really."

The sixth year wizard raised a challenging brow as they slogged up another hill. "So you'd rather they be completely mad at me, then?" He turned to the prefect when he didn't answer right away to find a coltish smirk adorning his face.

"Harry, Harry," he started with false sincerity and an impeding sigh, "I've got to say, in these past months, you've become something of a brother to me." The Gryffindor became suspicious when the Paraffin slung his arm around his shoulder as they ascended the hummock into biting winds. "So, I feel completely comfortable with saying 'yes'." Harry abruptly shrugged the Being's arm off with an empty scowl.

"Some brother you are."

With a breathy sigh, and a gleeful chuckle the Celestial heir strode toward the castle steps determinedly. "I know." He replied in a shrewd manner. "It's great to be the oldest. Besides, I told you to tell them, and you declined." Harry lurched slightly from the boy's playful nudge. "So it's your fault, Potter." Harry grumbled to himself as they clambered up the steps and unfolded their scarves, parting ways as Kaltag stopped to talk to a Ravenclaw.

It was the immediate warmth of the castle and the contending aromas of several choices of mouth-watering meats and dishes wafting from the Great Hall that made Harry realize he'd been hungry for quite some time. Decorated trees lined every five yards of wall along the hall, nearly all as tall as Hagrid. No doubt Flitwick had bedecked the trees, charmed with fairy lights that fluttered animatedly around the branches.

He dropped between Ginny and Ron, and filled his salver with gusto. "Where've you been?" Ron questioned, dipping into his third helping of roasted potatoes. Harry swallowed quickly and muttered a reply of, "Greenhouses. Extra credit."

"Ah," Ron winced with a nod. "Barely managed an Acceptable on my last exam." He shook his head. "I knew I should've nicked

Hermione's notes." They rushed into an array of treacle fudge, cakes, and pastries as the hall hurried their dining to anxiously await the special presentation.

From what he'd heard, the Aripedes Choir usually performed a few songs after dinner at their school, the day before they head home. It seemed Dumbledore didn't want to break with the Celestial tradition.

All too soon, the last crumbs of dessert disappeared (Ron groaned as he was only halfway through his second helping) and the floating candles dimmed into a mysterious sapphire glow. Harry straightened in his seat as conversation died down to their last words, and the Great Hall gave way to silence.

The door to the antechamber of the Great Hall clicked open, and Harry spotted the figure of a plump woman waddle from the entrance. As the woman bustled about in front of the dais at the front of the hall, he saw her pull a long, wispy stick from her twisted hair, and heard tapping.

He knew it couldn't have been a wand, from its thin structure. After the insistent tapping echoed throughout the Great Hall, more robed figures emerged from the antechamber.

They Celestials shifted into place at the front of the Great Hall, some standing on the platform keeping the festooned head table, and others on the floor. As the students moved around the stout conductor, Harry spotted one lone choral member standing off to the side as the chorale settled. The room was awash in the cobalt candlelight, with the enchanted ceiling mirroring the snow now falling on the grounds.

As the woman lifted her baton, the candles hovering above the chorus brightened to their usual orange glow. The wizard spotted Nikola in the forefront, a stoic expression on her countenance as the rest of the room waited for the staid-faced group to commence. Harry craned his neck over Ron's shoulder as the woman finally brought her baton down in a swift manner. A melodic tone resounded throughout the room as Nikola started the rendition off.

Being's gawking, cherubs squawking,

Women search, and steeds clip-clopping,

All the sounds of Yule are whopping!  
Christmas, Christmas,  
Christmas, Christmas time is nigh!  
Merrymaking, pastry baking,  
Ciders, wines, and sweets—quite sav'ring!  
Garlands hanging, bells are clanging!  
Children sit in longing, panging;  
Waiting, waiting,  
Waiting, waiting, gifts are baiting!  
Ding-dong, ding-dong, Christmas Eve approaches e'er!  
Mother Hera trims her tree,  
While Father Zeus sets gifts with glee.  
Father Cronus ticks and tocks,  
As Mother Rhea keeps her watch.  
The Children of the Clouds prepare,  
As Christmas, Christmas settles near!  
Ding-dong, ding-dong, Christmas Eve expires now!

The great blend of voices echoed throughout the room as they performed their Yule carol. Harry noticed few of the Paraffin Beings regarded the Entity with mild pride; Hermione's neck was stretched as she tried to get a good look at the performers. His wandering eyes caught Luna Lovegood over at the Ravenclaw tables, bobbling her head and tapping her foot to the rich blend of voices.

Creatures sneaking, children sleeping,

Midnight falls, and snow is creeping.

Clouds across the full moon, sweeping:

Soft, the night! No evil scheming!

Ding-dong, ding-dong the eve of Yule has settled now!

Being of the Sun now races,

Helios, his whip he braces.

Riding o'er the sun's bright faces.

Ding-dong, ding-dong!

Whips are cracking, chariot's clacking,

As Yule Sun climbs, the Being's tracking,

He wields his belt so Sun will rise!

Ding-dong, ding-dong!

Ding-dong, ding-dong!

Ding-dong, ding-dong, Christmas morn approaches now!

Ding-dong, ding-dong, the sun of Christmas tops the sky!

He felt movement behind him as Ginny leaned over to speak softly to the brothers, "Nikola has a brilliant voice." The Smythes nodded in pride as Icarus inclined his head enthusiastically.

"Yeah, she would've made a great Nymph — "

THWACK!

"—Muse! I meant Muse!" The prefect glared at the menacing Thanos, rubbing his shoulder. Harry snorted and turned his attention to the carolers.

Fam'lies napping, children clapping,  
Floors are cov'red in vivid wrapping!  
Gleeful quaking, laughs and braying,  
Yule partakers celebrating!  
All Olympus has forsaken,  
For jus' one day, no grief invading!  
Ding and donging, Short but longing,  
Yule — the holiday belonging  
To all Beings great and small and  
For this day, joy is prolonging!  
Ding-dong, ding-dong, Christmas, Christmas morn is here!  
Ding-dong, ding-dong, Christmas is the time for cheer!  
Ding-dong, ding-dong, Peace, we wish, will persevere!  
Ding-dong, ding-dong, this, our prayer, for Yule this year.

The reverberation of the last note was drowned out by ecstatic applause. The Gryffindors and Paraffins leapt out of their seats to cheer on a small number of their housemates for a spectacular performance. Harry had to rub his ears as Ginny's loud hoots and whistles rang painfully in his ears.

The choir bowed to their continuous applause and few blushed as they made their way back to the antechamber. Dinner disbanded as the excited clamor of pupils broke out on the way to the exit. Following the Gryffindor chaser, Harry went through the nightly shoving and jostling match as students made for the exits.

The walk to Gryffindor Tower was quite jovial as the students discussed their plans for the holidays. Harry remained in the common room for a few defeating rounds of chess with Ron, before

he bade his housemates good night. Ron followed him up the familiar stairway talking excitedly about their trip tomorrow, but all Harry did was grunt and nod.

He was beginning to feel the exhaustion from that evening's freezing lesson, weighing his arms down and leaving an empty space in his stomach, despite his large supper. Basil, Dean, and Neville were stuffing the last of their robes into their trunks as Harry and Ron stumbled around, making sure they had packed everything. After discouragingly stowing Sirius' mirror between a pile of Dudley's old jeans, Harry tucked his wand under his pillow and sagged into bed, robes and all.

ooooo

Harry awoke early that morning and quickly dressed as Ron had just started to loudly yawn. Many of the beds seemed vacant as they walked out of the dormitory, meeting Hermione and Ginny for a quick breakfast before heading back to the dorms. After much persuasion, he managed to get the indignant Hedwig into her cage, and watched as Ron chased the animated Pigwidgeon around the quarters.

It was nearly ten when they dragged their trunks and cages down the steps and set out toward the entrance hall. He acknowledged Luna with a smile and nod as she mindlessly wandered behind a gaggle of Brittlebores, humming the choir's tune to herself.

There were students bustling about the corridors, hauling their trunks and animal cages while chatting with friends. Ron was prattling on about the Chudley Cannons chances against the Heidelberg Harriers, as Hermione nattered to his sister about temples found in Greece.

The Smythes followed quietly behind, along with Thanos, Circe, her younger brother, and the swarm of eager followers on their trail. Harry hugged his robes tightly as the chilled entrance hall succumbed to the morning's fresh snowfall.

Students of all ages milled about the castle doors and the grounds as they waited for the carriages to arrive. Harry clapped passing Gryffindor Beater Merrick Linwood on the back and began good-naturedly arguing with Ron. The prefect defended the Cannons,

which Harry didn't think stood a chance against the Stonewall Stormers unless they first beat the Harriers.

It was as a cluster of Ravenclaws and Voltaires passed did Harry spot a large, dark knot of Slytherins just over by the end of the steps. He narrowed his eyes as he saw Malfoy having what seemed to be an intense conversation with his old gang.

"Over there." he interrupted Ron's rant on the cheating Harriers. The redheaded prefect turned as well as Hermione and Ginny. Harry creased his brows.

"What're they up to?" Ron snorted and raised his brows.

"I'll bet I know what they're talking about." He murmured with a clever grin. "'Did you catch what happened at the last meeting? Missed it while I was busy fetching You-Know-Who's evening tea.'" Harry and Ginny snorted at Ron's horrible imitation of the Slytherin as Hermione frowned. Ginny shook her head and gave an excuse to leave the sixth years to find Luna. Ron eyed his sister closely as Harry beamed at an enormous figure.

"Hagrid." He greeted cheerfully. Ron and Hermione snapped their attention to the ruddy-cheeked half-giant, a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes buried deeply under his wild tangle of beard.

"Arry, Ron, Hermi'ne." he nodded respectively. Hermione nervously grinned, giving the gentle professor a quick embrace.

"Hello, Hagrid." She and Ron chorused. Pig twittered madly as Ron set his cage between Hedwig and Crookshanks'.

"Do yeh have time fer a cuppa?" he inquired expectantly. Harry glanced to his friends before he whirled around to the Smythes. Starbuck gave them a polite smile and shrugged.

"Carriages set off in less than an hour. Go on, we'll watch your things." Harry nodded with gratitude, setting off after Hermione and Ron. They weaved their way through students (not that it mattered, since Hagrid parted the masses quite easily) and descended the slight embankment to his modest hut. The snow-covered shelter looked as if it wouldn't be visible after another foot of snow. As they

neared the front door, Harry nearly ran into Ron as the keeper faltered.

"Erm, Hagrid," he tentatively began, "Professor Lykaeos isn't in there, is he?" Harry gave the back of Hagrid's knotted head a quick look and sighed in relief—Ron as well—when the large wizard shook his head.

"No, he wen' off in'a th' fores'," the half-giant mumbled something unintelligible to himself before he ended with, "Fer th' hunt, I s'pose." He opened the door with his saucer-sized hands just as Fang's booming barks were heard. "All righ', all righ', keep yer fur on." The boarhound bounded up to Hermione as they entered, licking their icy hands in turn.

It felt cozy and familiar to be back in Hagrid's hut, Harry noticed, eyeing the great pots and cages suspended above the room. A fire blazed in the hearth around a pot as Hagrid pulled out large teacups from his kitchen cupboard. Hermione and Ron took an armchair while Harry was forced to sit beside the anxious canine in the other.

Hermione glanced around the small cottage guiltily as she folded her hands primly. "How have you been, Hagrid?" The professor tugged on thick mitts to pull a steaming cauldron from the fire. Carefully setting it on the scrubbed table, he waved his gloved hand over it to cool it a bit.

"Fine, I s'pose." He answered quietly, setting up the tea utensils.

"Sorry we haven't stopped by more often." An ashamed Ron confessed. Hagrid waved them off as he waved over the cauldron.

"No need ter apologize," he heaved his massive shoulders. "I understand yer busy, wha' with N.E.W.T.s more'n a year away." Ron and Harry pointedly ignored Hermione's triumphant look. "At leas' I see you lot dur'ng lessons, an' all." Hagrid poured the scalding water in each mug with care.

"How's Grawp?" Harry asked, settling beside the worried Fang. Hagrid's beetle black eyes dimmed at the mention of his brother.

"Grawp's all righ'," he waved off Hermione's attempt to help him carry the steaming cups. His tone sounded too subdued for Harry's



liking. Hermione and Ron must have picked it up, because neither of them touched their tea. Hagrid stared out his tiny, frosted window with a rumbling sigh. Harry nudged his tea away from Fang's slaverling tongue. "Dumbledore's sending him to the Black Fores'," he miserably confessed. "Tha's in Germany."

Harry strangely felt his heart lift, though only slightly. He felt for Hagrid, but in this way, he would be safer; he had less chances of being caught by the Ministry with an illegal giant. "But that's good, isn't it?" Ron asked gently. "It's much bigger than the Forbidden Forest, after all."

"He'll have tons of more room to run free," Hermione mentioned, patting the despondent creature lover's arm.

"Yeah, more trees to uproot." Harry muttered, frowning at Hermione's disapproving look. "But you'll be able to visit him," he amended. "Germany's just across the Northern Sea." Hagrid sniffled with a nod. Harry was reminded how hard the wizard took it when they sent Norbert, his illegal baby dragon, off to Romania.

"Yer righ'," he dejectedly admitted, dabbing the tears from the corners of his eyes with a hairy kerchief. "Jus' a few days' journey by boat."

Hermione rubbed the half-giant's arm reassuringly while the boys sloshed their tea. "And Germany's right next to France," she added with a knowing smile. "Where you can visit Madam Maxime." Harry thought he saw a slight twinkle return to the dark eyes of his good friend, as well as a smile buried under his snarled beard.

"I was goin' ter visit Olympe fer Chris'mas," he declared, sipping his brew, "to try ter see wha' th' giants have decided." The three nodded, swallowing larger gulps of tea. He turned his inquisitive eyes to the trio. "Goin' back to London, are yeh?"

"Greece." Harry hollowly stated. Hagrid's brow furrowed as Harry swilled the hot drink calculatingly in his mouth.

"We're staying with Celestial friends." Ron explained. "I think it's best for all of us this year." Hagrid simply nodded, never having met the triplets. They continued with light conversation, draining their mugs and walking back with the gentle half-giant.

They trudged back to the awaiting carriages in sociable silence. Harry made it a point to ignore the shiny eyes of the thestrals as he climbed into the carriage Ginny held open for them. The ride to the train was bumpy with light conversation.

They separately exited the carriage's short ride to Hogsmeade station, Ron grumbling about how house elves should carry their trunks for them under Hermione's dark look. Pig chirruped wildly as Ron swung his cage in one hand and dragged his trunk in the other.

They swiftly moved through the packed train, searching for a vacant compartment and wishing other classmates a happy Yule. As they settled in one of the last empty compartments, Harry truly hoped this Christmas would be some semblance of normal without certain familiar faces.

ooooo

The train ride seemed exceptionally short, flying by in a blur of conversation, Gobstones, and Exploding Snap. Harry and Ron taught Starbuck and Nikola how to play Exploding Snap as Kaltag finished perusing his stack of parchment with a furrowed brow. Hermione buried her nose in a book on the Regulations of Magical Beasts, while Ginny compartment-hopped for most of the ride.

Neville, Dean and Seamus visited for a few minutes, as did Luna and a relaxed Ginny, and the triplets were visited by many known and unknown acquaintances. Few Defense Association members popped in, and Harry was at odds with himself as Cho was not one of them.

He certainly didn't miss the tears she usually shed, but lately, the Ravenclaw seemed distant, even from her current beau. None of the Slytherins or Aves dropped in fortunately, as Nikola pointed out most of the Aves were taking the noon carriages to Olympus. They were notified when the train was about to pull into the station.

Heaving their chests and cages from the overhead racks, the Paradors stood behind a diverse host of Hogwarts and Aripedes students piling out of the railcar. The familiar post of platform nine and three-quarters was quite welcoming as the group gathered

themselves toward the barrier. "Is your father meeting us here?" Ginny asked, tugging her trunk along.

"Suspect so." Nikola creased her brows as a horde of Kaenslars breezed by. Small sets of students were already walking through the deceptive barrier to or with their parents. Harry stood his trunk on its side and settled Hedwig's cage atop it as he fished for owl treats to soothe her ruffled disposition.

"Don't see him." The Entity announced as she craned her neck over the crowds. The Smythes were just beginning to search the platform when Harry felt a warm hand on his shoulder. Spinning on his heel with wand in hand, the Gryffindor stared at the man in surprise.

"Daedelus!" Nikola exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" Harry tucked his wand away as the rest turned to confront the smiling faces. Daedelus bowed his head reverently to them all and folded his hands.

"Your father sends his apologies. He should be home when you arrive." There was a cynical snort from the oldest Paraffin.

"I'm sure." Daedelus chose to ignore the Being.

"What a pleasant surprise, Ron, Hermione," he nodded at each of them in turn. "Ginny and Harry. Good to see you again." His smile of sincerity eased Harry's incomprehension.

"You've met?" Starbuck blurted out.

"Earlier this summer." Daedelus shifted his attention toward the barrier. "Right before we went to the Fortress. And here's Eomel." Harry wanted to ask how they knew each other but instead greeted the approaching man with a polite grin as he towed two trolleys along with him, and started to methodically pile trunks and cages on them. The elder of the two guards assisted his partner as he instructed the group.

"Give us a few minutes. We'll handle your luggage." He sighed dramatically as he heaved the flushed Hermione's trunk. Harry surmised she must have loaded the carrier with every schoolbook she owned. "You know where to go." He felt a tug on his jumper sleeve as Hedwig sharply eyed the Being.

"All right. Epharisto." Kaltag gently pulled Harry by the arm toward the steaming scarlet steam engine. Giving the boy a baffled look, Harry noticed he also had an equally confused Ginny by the wrist. Just ahead, Starbuck similarly escorted Ron, and Hermione was giving Nikola an odd look.

They were a good couple of yards from the loading Celestials when Kaltag's grip squeezed slightly. "Hang on." Was all Harry heard before he felt a brisk chill and the platform dissolved before his wide eyes.

ooooo

Luckily Kaltag had a tight grip on his arm, because Harry's legs faltered as they landed hard. He felt somewhat nauseous as his head swam, but he tried to focus his eyes on the ivory light before him. It seemed Kaltag knew he wasn't quite himself yet, and continued his hold on him until the urge to be sick passed. As his eyes floated back into focus, Harry was much less embarrassed to notice he wasn't the only one affected so: Ron was definitely green, Hermione was quite pale, and Ginny looked rather unwell herself.

"Same thing happened to us the first time. Honestly, it gets better." Kaltag's heartening tone stated. Harry noticed the whiteness was reflected from a window behind them, and he could definitely hear voices behind it. "Are you all confident enough to walk by yourselves? The dizzy feeling should have passed by now." Kaltag released his hold on Harry before he could answer, but the Gryffindor didn't sway as much on his feet.

"What," a wan Hermione began. "What did you just do?" Harry's interest swung in the direction of the Celestials.

Starbuck shrugged. "Rippling."

"Come again?"

"Rippling," he repeated, buttoning his coat. "In wizard's terms, Celestial Apparation." Harry wrinkled his brow, staring at the siblings in disbelief.

"You can apparate?"

"No, we can ripple." Nikola corrected.

"But," Hermione's voice seemed small and distant, as if she'd just been told she'd done a potion wrong, "You're too young. You can't apparate, or ripple; you need a license."

"To apparate," Starbuck emphasized. "Rippling can be done by any Celestial over the age of ten. No license needed." Harry lowered his brows.

"No restrictions. And it isn't fully monitored." Kaltag added, walking forward, toward the voices behind the door Harry just noticed. "It's a natural Celestial ability. Let's get out of here. Daedelus and Eomel are probably waiting." He opened the door leading into a dim corridor.

"Waiting?" Ron questioned. "Where are we?" They ambled into the dimly lit corridor, lined with dying candles. They seemed to be surrounded by stone, and there were doors on each side. Harry's hand was on his wand as a door popped open, and out walked a group of nearly ten squat Celestials. He couldn't find it in himself to return their acknowledging nods.

"The Temple of Bemus," Kaltag muttered, inclining his head respectfully. "The Rippling Point. If you ripple to Olympus, this is where you're intended for."

"Wait, wait, wait," Ron waved his arms and called loudly, earning them irked looks. "Did you say Olympus? As in, we're in Olympus?" They climbed the steps quickly and were in what seemed to be the blinding white atrium. Harry could see a wide entrance and movement beyond the exiting Celestials.

"Yes," Kaltag shortly answered, nodding to a tall, severe-looking Entity. "We're in Olympus." He briskly walked toward the exit, Harry marching closely behind as Ron looked stunned and Hermione excited. "Follow closely, and if anyone tries to sell you anything, feel free to hex them."

"Kaltagonus!" Nikola chastised. The boy led the way into the brilliant warmth of the sun, which seemed a bit closer than Harry thought comfortable. With an exhale, the ginger-haired prefect corrected, "I

meant to say, graciously refuse them." Harry barely acknowledged the boy's amendment as wide green eyes surveyed the bustle below them.

It was obvious they were on a hilltop or a low mountain, as they overlooked the gleaming alabaster city one long stairwell below them. Harry could see buildings and streets and people walking about. The strident chatter of the citizens rose above all else as many Celestials exited the rippling station. Strangely, some of the buildings looked quite familiar as the Paradors paused to look over the municipality.

"Everything is so ... white," Harry commented, watching as a silver streak blurred by.

"And clean," Ginny piped, equally awed.

"The Ancient Greeks liked color." Starbuck lectured. "We ... like to keep it simple."

"This is the Acropolis," Hermione professed, brown eyes wide with wonder. She gestured to a large building situated on a small peak at the center of the city. "That's the Parthenon." The bright witch jostled her hand at another structure. "And there! That's the Erechtheum! And the Temple of Apollo at Didyma!" Ron gave Harry and amused look. "And ... the Temple of Athena Nike! Oh, gosh . . . ." Hermione moaned with longing.

Kaltag gave his sister an amused look. "She forgot the Propylaea, dearest." Hermione's eyes widened and she wildly spun around, frantically looking for the so-called structure.

"Do you realize what this is?" She grabbed Ron's robes in her fists, startling the tall wizard. Her great smile alarmed Harry as well as the normally collected Ginny. The bushy-haired Gryffindor released Ron and gazed at the city with exhilaration. "This is the Acropolis revived!"

"The Greeks had some great ideas in architecture. We didn't want to let that go to waste." Starbuck casually stated. Hermione's gaze was keenly fixed on the structural designs. "But this is the main city, the Aristopolis."

"Aptly titled."

"Our Parthenon is where the Authority of Celestiaity is housed; the Erechtheum is our bank. They're all completely out of character than what the original engineers arranged them for. But, we need to get out of here." Harry, Ron and Ginny shared looks at Hermione's disappointed look.

"We'll come back another time." Nikola assured, patting the reluctant witch on the shoulder. As the trio of young ladies set down the steps first, Harry and Ron paused as Starbuck looked toward the distant west. Harry squinted, as clouds were partially blocking something. In the expanse, it appeared to be a lush, high mountain with a building situated atop its summit. The wavy-haired fenzer breathed a yearning sigh.

"So close, but yet . . . ." he issued another heavy sigh as Kaltag returned his troubled glance. Harry furrowed his brows and shared Ron's quizzical look. "Let's get out of here." The brothers averted the mount and started down the hill.

The descent to the main city wasn't as long, but was uneventful. Hermione passionately babbled about the types of columns used on the buildings as they wound their way toward their destination. Harry noticed he was quite warm in his clothing, and noticed they received many odd looks for their attire.

The Celestials seemed to be clothed in naught but bland sheets with simple designs and wreaths made of leaves clinging to their heads. Others bore thin cloaks or robes in conservative colors; with the sun overhead, he realized the city was without snow. Voices shouted from the street corners of merchants selling all bits and pieces. Ron nearly whipped out his wand on a feeble, frazzle-haired Being trying to market a corrosive earwax removal solution.

The atmosphere of the Aristopolis was pleasant; it was light. Conversation drifted from the cost of cider ("Deka a pair, now! Unbelievable!"), to trinkets ("She tossed the hourglass at my head, yelling I'd best try again if I thought our bond was worth a bottle of sand.") and other topics he couldn't quite understand.

While some tones indicated a foreign tongue, most conversations were held in English. As they rounded Halcyon Bend, Harry found

himself on a long stretch of road, riddled with side shops and a throng of shopping Celestials. "Aristedes Square." Ginny read the wrought iron archway above their heads.

"Nearly there." Kaltag assured, leading the way. Harry barely had time to read the names of the shops before he was jostled through a doorway and into a dusky shop. The store seemed quite old, with many antique objects on display collecting dust.

A yellowed globe revolved steadily above miniature figurines, and stacks of furrowed parchment strongly reminded Harry of Kenward. "This way." Kaltag whispered, passing a cracked vase of wilted roses. For the first time Harry noted the bareness of the shop, void of the avid consumers on the street just outside. In fact, it seemed as if no one had made a purchase in the store for years, even decades.

The Paradors twisted through the artifacts and tables toward a moth-eaten drape. The eldest Being heaved the hangings aside, revealing a scarcely cobwebbed wooden door. His fingers curled around the ornate bronze doorknob and the door opened with a slight groan. Kaltag gestured for the others to follow him as they entered a room with only a dwindling torch for light.

The room was quite narrow, but long, and there were many large relics present. Though the constriction was attributed to the cramped artifacts lining the small storage room, Harry made out the small path leading to a dead end mirror. "Don't ... touch anything." Nikola warned. "I don't feel like relic skipping all over the world to find you." Ron paused with his hand barely centimeter over a tarnished effigy before he quickly withdrew it.

"Here," Starbuck motioned the rest. "Be careful. Don't touch that urn or I'm sure you'll wind up in Africa somewhere." Harry quickly kept his hands to himself, trailing Hermione's footsteps. They halted before a large slab, covered with colored broken glass. Frowning, Harry was about to question the importance of the tableau when Kaltag turned to them seriously.

"Just touch the mosaic and walk through." He directed the baffled Gryffindors. "Don't panic."

"What is it?" Hermione questioned with her ever-fascinated lilt.



"Mosaic of Koropi," he responded, lengthening his hand. "Whatever you do, don't panic. If you do, goodness knows where you might end up." He inched closer still and hardly grazed his fingertips over the broken shards of glass before he walked through and vanished.

"Where ... ?" Harry's eyes widened as they searched the mosaic for the Being. He hoped he wasn't using his abilities to boast again.

"You next, Ginny." The redheaded fifth year gave the pastiche askance consideration before she soon disappeared at its touch. "Hermione." The prefect straightened her jumper with anxiety before she, too was sucked in. Nikola went next, then Ron. Starbuck gave the remaining wizard and expectant look before Harry stood in front of the artwork.

He fidgeted with his fingers for a moment, finally extending them, and reaching out for the mosaic. Biting his lip in apprehension, Harry curled his fingers out of tense reflex, before he spread them out and scuffed the edge of a blue shard.

Instantly, he felt as if something had seized his arm and yanked him forward in a rapid whirl of color and space. He imagined it was something fairly resembling a portkey, only without the burden of a peculiar item and the uncomfortable tug behind his navel.

And then Harry experienced the discomfort of being hurled forward; an experience he hadn't encountered since Quirrell jinxed his first broomstick back in first year. Harry lurched on his once sturdy legs and slumped against a wall directly before him. He couldn't help but feel the wave of nausea return full force.

"It gets better. Really, it does." Kaltag perked from beside him. Harry fixed him with a black look. With deep breaths, he turned his attention to the stone wall, stained with pictorial graffiti in assorted symbols. Seconds later, the same rough wall spat out the blonde Being.

"Was that the mosaic?" Ginny queried as the Smythes took off down the snow-covered alley. Harry pinched his nose as the stench of compost attacked his nostrils.

"It was." One of the Beings answered. They trotted through the gray flurry to the sounds of car horns and people. Making sure his wand was still in place, Harry felt the handle of his wand as they approached the active boulevard. Ginny gave a watery-eyed vagrant a startled look as he slurred something in an exotic vernacular; Ron protectively towed her away, giving the tattered-cloaked man a dark look. Vehicles sputtered by as they left the obscured alley onto a beaten path.

Harry glanced around the urban scene, eyeing the workers and consumers in interest. The Muggles were quite a difference from the buoyant Celestials in the Aristopolis. He furiously shook his head as a bronze-skinned woman thrust a particularly nasty bottle in his face that tickled his nose.

"Over there." Nikola spoke, nodding toward the vehicles lining the avenue. Standing beside two utility automobiles were the smartly dressed Beings, Daedelus and Eomel. The senior stood with a wide grin on his face as he held the door open for the boys.

"Took you long enough." The witches and Entity loaded the first sport vehicle with Eomel, as the sounds of urban Athens filtered through the tinted windows. Harry latched on his safety belt as the vehicles pulled into traffic, finally setting off for their destination.

Conversation revolved around Aristopolis and local culture. Starbuck eagerly supplied them with the answers they needed, while the ginger-haired prefect grunted few words and stared at the passing scenery. The necklace dangled innocently from around his neck, lazily swirling its dark hues. Though his attention was directed toward the city behind the windows, his eyes, Harry discerned were a bit aloof.

Snowcapped knolls and freshly powdered trees went by in a flurry as the ride continued for the better part of an hour. The foliage was quite thick, and Harry frowned when he couldn't see beyond the trees. The vehicle rode rather ruggedly as they resumed up the dirt path.

Harry was beginning to think the road and endless trees would never end when Ron hailed. His eyes darted to the other passengers, before they settled on looking past the main windshield. He could see why Ron reacted as he did.

Less than a kilometer ahead of the girls' vehicle stood a formidable-looking manor, tinged in off white. It gave off a rather stately appearance, but still managed to look quite simple. The forest swallowing the motor vehicles morphed into single standing trees bordering the extensive lane. "You said you lived in a house?" Came Ron's incredulous accusation. Kaltag snorted, his eyes still fixed beyond the window.

"More like prison."

"Fortress."

"Whatever." He waved his brother's response off.

Daedelus followed Eomel's lead and rounded the large stone sculpture in the cul-de-sac before they stilled the vehicles. Harry and Ron were too busy ogling the great manor before the slam of car doors alerted them to their duties. He filed out after Ron, sheepishly accepting his offered trunk and his vigilant owl's cage. The escorts closed their trunks and beamed at the students.

"Well, home again." Daedelus inclined his head. "We'll see you soon, hopefully." As the Gryffindors expressed their gratitude for the ride, the Smythes started up the stone stairway to the large mahogany double doors.

"Happy Christmas." They conveyed, waving pointlessly as the men sped back up the private road. It took a fair bit of effort, but the students (with the exception of Nikola) managed to haul their trunks and cages up the steps and onto the elongated veranda. Harry examined the massive columns supporting the terrace covering as Nikola pushed one door open, and the seven escaped the unpleasant cold.

The grandeur of the manor was sealed as Harry's eyes traced the luxurious interior. A grand marble staircase dominated the heart of the ground floor, situated between majestic columns, and the marble glimmered from an abundance of overhead light.

The staircase gave way to the three-quartered circular landing of the second floor, where Harry could only spot a rounded railing. To his right, inland pillars lead to his glimpse of a holly-festooned feast

table, and to his left was a plain cloak rack with more columns leading into darkness.

He narrowed his eyes as he glimpsed the interior of another room, catching sight of antiques and a smooth, black and angular object. "Blimey." Ron's broad eyes roamed over the unadorned fawn walls punctuated by small mounted lamps and portraits. Kaltag waved to the west side.

"Wouldn't mind living here." Harry muttered, giving Ron an evenly overwhelmed glance.

"Short tour: drawing room, kitchen, dining room, pantry and study." Hermione's eyes glimmered at the mention of the small library. He motioned to their right. "Sitting room is behind the steps. Art room and storeroom is over there, father's office and Erastus' room is usually off limits."

"Hasn't stopped us before, though." The youngest Being thoughtfully stated.

"Hm, and look where it's gotten us." The three started up the flight of stairs, lugging their trunks and familiars along. Pig was bouncing off the wire walls of his cage at the prospect of an unfamiliar area. "Upstairs, then." As they climbed, Harry noted the circular skylight fixed to the ceiling, with intense white light penetrating from the outside.

Ginny, Hermione and Ron stared everywhere they could, taking in the basic magnificence that was Smythe Manor. Upon reaching the landing, Nikola tugged Hermione and Ginny down their left, whispering excitedly as they departed.

They curved around the sturdy railing to a carpeted corridor with seven closed doors and a small window at the end. Starbuck opened the first door on his left, and he hopped across to open the opposite door. Light spilled from both rooms. "These are your rooms, then. Not much to fight over. Unless you want to share a room, I dunno." Ron shrugged, taking the first room. Harry returned the nonchalant gesture and gripped Hedwig's cage between moist fingers.

The room bled with the simple elegance of the main floor, with a large four-poster, desk, and more, with two doors, one of which he assumed led to a bathroom. Setting Hedwig's cage on the ornate desk, Harry narrowed his eyes at a simple potted plant atop a fresh stack of parchment.

Idly wondering if Kaltag mentioned anything in his correspondences, the seeker ruffled his hair and placed his trunk at the edge of the double bed. Soft burgundy covered the four walls, with a bronze light switch by the door. Running his fingers over the downy comforter, Harry plopped himself unceremoniously on the bed. He tried to feel excited and tried to grin madly at their luck, but he couldn't.

Instead he wondered where Sirius was, and if he'd be in a place as luxurious as this.

Harry strongly doubted it.

Pushing the depressing thoughts from his mind, Harry rolled himself off of the bed and gave the plant a hard look. Hedwig hooted in support, her amber eyes fixed on the boy's frown. Her emotions read worry and support. "'M Fine, Hedwig." He murmured, forcing a smile. "Don't shed too many feathers. This isn't an Owlery." She replied with an offended hoot, and Harry chuckled before he exited his room.

Though he really wanted to tour the manor, he knew it wouldn't exactly be polite to prowl through a stranger's home. With a bit of surprise, Harry noted the home was quite modest; in fact, it didn't appear to display an ounce of magic. He stared at Ron's closed door and the other four sealed ones. The third door on his side was ajar; giving in to his curiosity, Harry concluded it wouldn't hurt to take a peek.

He noticed movement behind the closed door and was immediately interested. Harry could see a rich indigo shade on the wall, and heard a loud snap. A sharp hoot was heard, and Harry heard a distinct tone mutter, "Not you, too." So this was Kaltag's room. The door was quickly jerked and Harry faced an equally startled prefect. "Hey. Everything all right?" Harry dumbly stared, glancing toward his room.

"Plant ... in my room." Kaltag's eyes thinned, as he appraised the Gryffindor.

"A plant?"

"My desk. On my desk." He added. Kaltag shrugged.

"New thing, maybe. Come in." He held the door open in invitation and Harry entered. Kaltag's room mirrored his, but the space had a more personal touch to it. The walls were bathed in deep indigo, and the bed was facing another door. Bookshelves rested in two corners and a neat desk sat against the wall behind the door.

The silver owl inclined its head inspecting the messy-haired boy, as Kaltag quietly closed the door behind him. "Sorry if it's a bit untidy at the moment." He graciously apologized. Perking an eyebrow, Harry noticed the only thing remotely unkempt were the covers pulled down on the four-poster.

"Yes, because your room is in such a state," he ridiculed, snorting at the boy's shrug.

"What can I say? I'm a tidy louse." His fingers curled habitually around the Ravenstone gem. Harry nodded and his eye caught a gleam over the desk. A mantel was set over the writing table, exhibiting numerous plaques and official certificates marred with dust. Small figures emblazoned in false gold depicted horses, a football, dueling forms, and musical notes. Squinting his eyes at a particularly large award, Harry's eyes roved over the etched lettering.

"Dover College?" he inquired. "You schooled in Kent?" The boy responded with a nod, his bright eyes reducing somewhat.

"Six years. I'm a certified prat."

"We were near each other. Surrey." Harry gave the Celestial a small grin.

Kaltag gave a wry smile while traversing his arms. "That's not very near." Harry rolled his eyes.

"I meant 'same country' near." His green eyes wandered back to the honors. "Fencing. Archery, football ... equestrian."

"Quite the spoiled rich boy, I'd say." Harry raised his chin toward the music accolades. "Piano and choir." He resentfully confirmed. There was a standard globe beside Argentum's cage, and Harry spotted a desk lamp plugged into the wall outlet. Tracing the continent of South America, Harry chose his words carefully.

"If you don't mind me saying," he eyed the Being briefly as the boy nodded for continuation. "Your home is quite ... quite Muggle."

"Were you expecting a winged horse stable in the back and furniture-changing rooms and eerie glowing with smoke?" The student queried in amusement.

"Moving portraits, at least." Kaltag stepped away to ungraciously drop to his bed in a heap.

"Well, I've been a Mortal since I was two," he pensively began, "and started Being when I was twelve." He pushed himself on his elbows to regard the Boy-Who-Lived. "I guess in those ten years when I was barely home, my father wanted us to live as normal a life as possible. Didn't want us knowing and such." He limply fell back to the bed. Harry furrowed his brows, leaning carefully against the desk.

"I still don't understand why you can't see your mother," he quietly stated. Kaltag tensed. "How will anyone know if she sees you or your brother and sister?" With a drawn out sigh, the Being sat properly on his bed, giving Harry a thorough look. The Gryffindor expectantly held his gaze, waiting for an explanation. Turning away, the Being's icy eyes took on the same distant gleam he wore for most of the day.

"He's got a spy somewhere. Close to my mother." Harry barely heard the whisper of confession. "But we don't know where, or who they are." Harry fiddled with a fat string on his jumper as the Being continued.

"Father's investigation ruled out all family of the High Being, and now they're moving on to the Celestial Authority and staff members at the palace. If she so much as breathes in our direction, we'll be kidnapped and/or killed. Mystikos was a Celestial once. He probably has the resources to do it." Harry gulped, his throat dry. He knew he had raised a delicate subject and cursed his curiosity.

"Oh." The wizard uttered, wishing he had stayed in his room. "But, how can they get to you? Aren't you protected?" Harry thought of the wards and blood protection spells that kept him obscured from Voldemort's grasp. The Being shrugged.

"At school, we've a good bit. Here, enough to shield Muggles and other uninvited wizards. Not too sure about here. Grandfather does all he can. It's the best he can do."

"If you don't mind me asking...?" Kaltag flippantly gestured.

"Oh, you've torn my life to pieces, what's a few more questions?" Harry's eyes widened somewhat. The Being gave the silent wizard a questioning look before he laughed. "I was kidding." Harry gave him a dark look, making the Paraffin's laughs double.

"You can't see your mother, but you can see your grandfather?"

"I can, but we don't take that chance."

"I thought you said you met your mother?"

"When we were thirteen. Big fiasco with granddad's thunderbolt and the Moirae Dimension. A rescue mission, basically." Harry's brows settled in his fringe. Kaltag considered him with a stare. "Must I tell you everything?"

"You already know too much about me." The Celestial fixed him with a look.

"I ... we," he corrected, glaring at the wall in Starbuck's direction, "Sort of found this thread." Harry raised a brow.

"A thread." He stated skeptically.

"A life thread, we sort of killed our granduncle," he grimaced as Argentum nipped his finger. "Mum fixed it." Kaltagonus remained tightlipped about the rest. Harry nodded, straightening himself as he stood.

"Well, I'll get back to my room."



"Yeah, I forgot to tell you we have adjoining lavatories, so if you see steam before dawn, it's just me." Harry nodded, heading toward the door. "I'm starving. Let's see if Erastus has left us anything." Harry wrinkled his features as they entered the corridor. Before they took another step, they heard the front door slam.

"Brood! Unruly offspring of mine!" he heard a familiar voice call out. Kaltag rolled his eyes at the call as doors flew open. Nikola was the first to breeze by, ruffling Harry's hair as she passed. Starbuck took a more reserved stance as he calmly descended the stairs.

Ginny and Hermione followed, and Ron gave Harry an excited look. "I've got my own room!" he enlightened. "With emphasis on room! I can actually move around!" He continued to babble as they set down the stairs beside each other.

Harry spotted Nikola dangling in her father's embrace, squeezing her arms around his neck; Spiridon appeared to be turning blue. "Papa!" she greeted, kissing him on the cheek. The dark-haired general looked quite relieved when she released him. "You're late."

"Hybrids trying to smuggle Manticores." He simply stated. His eyes settled on his wavy-haired son, approaching him with a calm smile.

"Dad." Spiridon fondly pecked his son's forehead, embracing him with delight. "Up for tea later?"

"If you promise a long conversation." He countered. The Being fancifully smiled. "You're on." At last, the prominent Celestial faced his guests with a convivial smile.

"It's wonderful to have you all here," he shook their hands firmly, clapping them on their shoulders. Harry tried not to flinch when the hard hand thumped his back; he could see where Nikola inherited her muscle. "You must be Ginevra." Ginny beamed, shaking the Battalion leader's hand with vigor.

"Ginny, please." She requested.

"If that's what you fancy." He accepted. Ron gave the older Being a bizarre look.

"We don't have to kiss you, do we?" Spiridon's rumbling laughter echoed throughout the hall. Hermione elbowed Ron in the ribs, but the Gryffindor kept his gaze on the amused father.

"No, I think not, Mr. Weasley." His eyes glowed with mirth. Ron visibly relaxed. As the clever witch generously greeted the Celestial general, Harry spotted his eldest son slowly descending the imposing staircase with crossed arms. There was something about his smile that didn't seem natural, as if it was forced onto his face. The navy-eyed Celestial caught sight of his son and grinned proudly.

"Father." Harry construed his tone was strained, too. As Spiridon leaned forward to press an affectionate kiss to his son's forehead, the young Being swerved his head at the last instant. Harry noted some disappointment from the elder Smythe as Kaltag turned away. "Trouble at the office?" He casually stated. The man draped his coat over his arm.

"Always."

Silence blanketed the manor as father stared at his son's bowed head. "Er, thanks for letting us stay here, Mr. Smythe." Hermione piped, giving the others awkward looks.

"My house is always open to friends and families alike. I rather enjoy a full house." He paused, jerking his neutral tie in a more comfortable manner. "In fact, I was just informed we will be receiving more guests for the holidays." Heads tilted and eyebrows furrowed at the disclosure.

"Who?"

The Celestial general frowned slightly. "It isn't very gentlemanlike to be nosy." Kaltagonus raised his eyes skyward in annoyance. Harry fought not to shake his head at the boy's petulance.

"Well, sorry, but I rather choose to be in the know than to be completely clueless as to who's invading our house this time." Ginny lifted a brow as Ron twisted his jaw in exasperation. Spiridon eyed his son with a sharp glance.

"Kaltagonus." He reproached. Said Paraffin huffed, sulking in displeasure. Harry really couldn't see how the top student and prefect in Paraffin was the same irritable child in front of him.

"Fine. I'll wait on Yule. That should please you."

"Let's see if there's anything in the pantry." Nikola supplied eyeing Kaltagonus suspiciously. The girls started away and Ginny tugged on Harry's sleeve. Father and firstborn remained still as the others ambled away.

"We are unveiling Smythe Communications to the public after the New Year," he heard Spiridon gently tell the prefect. "You will accompany me to the inauguration."

"Great. Let me just cancel all of my plans to benefit you. Anything to make you happy." The Being's sarcastic tone was faint.

"Did you read the packet?"

"The novel you sent me? Yes, yes I did. Great bedside material."

"Kaltagonus." Spiridon's tone scolded. There was a sharp sigh. Harry couldn't hear their low conversation as they marched past the library and rounded the corner into the pantry. The Paradors munched on buttered biscuits that made Harry wonder what Mrs. Figg would be doing for Christmas. It had been a while since he'd last seen the aged Squib.

Conversation was untroubled as the six made plans to explore Aristedes Square and Aristopolis in the coming days. Nikola had just unfastened another packet of biscuits when raised voices carried into the small space.

"...As it was my mistake for not informing you, you will go unpunished." A derisive snort followed Spiridon's statement.

"A mistake?" the prefect's tone was bitter. "No, a mistake is you forgetting to buy my schoolbooks for the year. You deliberately let me go to school, knowing I'd be a target." Harry caught Hermione and Ron's immobile gazes, as the stint in their heated discussion ended.

"I understand you're—"

"No, I don't think you understand having this necklace marked me! There are spies everywhere, and you tossed me in there without a clue!"

"Kaltag ..." Nikola and Starbuck seemed quite uncomfortable and frustrated by their eavesdropping of the argument, but remained silent.

"If you wanted to use me as target practice, gosh, a warning would have taken care of that." The young Being mocked.

"Tagonus . . . ."

"Spare me!" Ron crunched quietly on the last bite as the echoes once again faded into the walls. Nikola primly leapt off of the counter, staring at the floor. Starbuck crossed his arms with a frown.

"Be lucky you aren't grounded." The martial tone of Spiridon Smythe menaced.

"Hm." Harry discerned the rebellion in the Celestial's tone. "Imagine my bloody luck." The brows of the Paradors raced into their fringe at the barefaced defiance. Harry could tell by their argument, Spiridon was not one to endure such noncompliance.

"Kaltagonus Lucien Smythe." He could almost hear the gnashing of the general's teeth. The holiday wasn't turning out what he'd quite hoped it to be; he only hoped Kaltag would come to his senses about who he was flouting. Of course, Harry was considerably shocked by the top student's response.

"Whatever."

He heard the departure of footsteps diminish up the stairwell. Kaltagonus did not come back down to the main floor for the rest of the evening. Shortly thereafter, the Gryffindors heard footsteps echoing to the other side of the manor, and a door audibly closed.

Observing his friends, he noticed Ron and Hermione gave one another awkward looks. Hermione appeared scandalized, as if Kaltag had just challenged a professor.

"That went better than I expected," Nikola quietly confessed with a small frown. "Not as much shouting as I would have thought." Her brown eyes sparkled with regret. Starbuck, on the other hand, smirked triumphantly.

"You owe me five Deka." His sister glared at him as she fished in her pocket, her pouch jingling as she handed over five coins in displeasure.

As Starbuck flauntingly counted the wage total, the Entity shook her head in disgust. "That's the last time I bet against a telepathic."  
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A/N: Part II to come soon.

## Chapter Twenty-One: Christmas at Themys Pallakis, Part Two

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". . . .I did not." Ron argued, holding the entrance open for the others. "It was just ..." he pulled a face, coloring slightly as the passing Ginny snickered by. "Fast, is all."

"My broomstick was faster than that. Your Cleansweep is faster than that." Harry mentioned, heaving his purchases. Ron made another face, but remained silent. With a merry sigh, Hermione pat the scampering Crookshanks on the head, albeit rougher than usual, and started up the steps. The ginger feline scurried away, with an expression parallel to a scowl.

"I could've stayed in your aunt's bookstore all day," she wistfully informed Nikola, reaching the landing. "We didn't have to leave so early, did we?"

"Goodness, it's nearly dark out," Kaltagonus appeared, rounding the landing, loosening his tie while appraising the group. "You lot go to London and back?" Ginny rolled her eyes and inclined her head at the beaming witch.

"Hermione spent nearly all day in your aunt's bookstore." She explained. Kaltagonus nodded grimly. "I think she read the entire east wing..." Hermione and Ginny departed to their quarters. Ron nodded at the Being's attire.

"I thought you were staying in?" The Celestial yanked off his tie as Nikola sped in and out of her room depositing her purchases.

"I had to go to the office," he contorted his face wincingly at the word, "with father. We were meeting with the vizier of the Arabic sect of the Authority. Mind you, I missed the class where they were teaching Arabic." His siblings shook their heads at his cynicism. As Harry and the others entered their individual rooms to set down their things, the prefect continued louder. "Apparently, that was my punishment."

Hedwig nipped Harry's finger gently, and set out the open window to hunt. "Punishment? I thought you weren't going to be punished."

Nikola pointed out as they gathered in the corridor once more. The Being scoffed and leaned tensely against the restroom door.

"Well, I'd like to think of it as punishment..." The Paradors were about to comment when the door across from the witches' wing abruptly shut. Harry's gaze shot over to the stranger approaching them. He couldn't believe his eyes.

"Come now, Kaltagonus," the older gentleman chided. Glancing at Kaltag, he realized he knew the wizened man. All of the triplets knew him. He balanced crisp sheets in his hands as he peered over his oval spectacles. Kaltag issued a sigh Harry missed, because he was looking back and forth between the man and the Smythes.

"Right, right." He resentfully accepted, scowling at the older person. "It's your future'." He breathed sharply as he righted himself and glared. "I've heard the bloody speech before."

The senior seemed vaguely content with the boy's response and nodded to the others slowly. "You must be the guests," he indicated, setting the sheets under his arm.

"Oh, right," Nikola distractedly waved. "You weren't here yesterday." His warm eyes twinkled in a very Dumbledore-like fashion.

"Good to know I've been sorely missed." He quipped, adjusting his black uniform. Hermione and Ginny gingerly took his hand while Harry merely stared.

"This is—"

"Erastus," Harry breathed as the man extended his hand. Lowering his brows, he noted the man appeared dimly surprised. Harry shook his head slightly to clear it. Though he now appeared somewhat older than when he first viewed him, he still had the same face, give or take a few wrinkles and grays.

"How do you know him?" Kaltag's voice entered. Harry turned to the blue eyes darting suspiciously between the both of them. All eyes flitted between the Gryffindor and the butler. Erastus gave Harry a hard look, as if searching his mind.

"I..." Harry began, creasing his forehead. "A dream, with you and Professor — "

"Perhaps," Erastus interrupted with a masked look at the seeker. He avoided Kaltag's gaze but still proffered, "It is best if your father told you." He smoothed the top sheet, clearly indicating he would say no more. Harry was confused by his interruption. But the Being beside him was irate.

"Told me what?" he snapped, boring into the man with a look. Erastus remained silent. Harry's eyes trailed to the prefect's hands, which curled into fists. "Erastus." He warningly advised. The silver thickets of brow over the man's eyes wrinkled.

"Tis not my place to tell you, young one." Kaltag gave him a withering look before stalking away, striding down the steps in determination. They listened to his heavy footfalls across the floor, before a door slammed shut. Perking his brow and smiling invitingly, Erastus motioned to the staircase fluidly. "I daresay you're famished from the day's events. Perhaps a bit to dine on in the kitchen before dinner?"

The Gryffindors followed the Entity's lead as she reluctantly nodded and headed for the steps. Harry pointedly ignored the quizzical looks from his housemates as he fell in line behind Ron. Erastus followed after, composing himself for a moment.

The ground floor was silent as they quietly made their way to the kitchen, trading questioning looks with one another. Harry was equally confused, as he still did not know how he had dreamt of Snape and Erastus. The aged caretaker bustled around the kitchen, preparing beverages and sandwiches as he grilled the group about their first term.

After eating his fill of honey biscuits and reluctantly weaning himself off of the famed Celestial Ambrosian cider, Harry left the others to chat under Erastus' scrutiny. He found the kitchen to be too crowded and stifling, especially under the concerned glimpses from all six of the kitchen's occupants. Glimpsing quickly into the decorated dining room, Harry bypassed the study and drawing room, deciding to head upstairs. Grinning amusedly to himself, he realized he still needed to send the Dursleys a postcard. He absently rubbed his scar as it tingled, scratching his head afterward.



As he neared the steps, he froze, catching movement from his right. Turning with a creased brow, Harry slowly advanced on the art room, his hand on his wand for good measure. The sounds of Spiridon and Kaltag drifted mutedly from the general's office. Harry vaguely realized they might have another guest, but didn't think they'd let such information escape their minds. Closing in on the art room entrance, Harry definitely heard a muffled clatter. Wand out, ready for attack, Harry pointed it at the ragged figure hunched on the floor.

"Drop it," he demanded in a low voice. The stranger paused in their crouched position before standing quickly. Harry thought of the first effective spell to throw before the figure spun around. Blinking, Harry eyed the wizard incredulously; this was turning out to be one unusual evening. "Sirius?"

The Animagus appeared quite worn, and looked much like Hagrid appeared after going a round with Grawp. He had faint pink lines riddling his gaunt face, as his lips stretched into a dog-like smile. "Harry." The teenager smirked.

"What, did you lose a fight with a werewolf?" Sirius answered with a grim smile.

"I'd like to think it was a draw." In long strides the wizard reached his godson and clapped him on the shoulder. "Good to see you, Harry." Harry would have smiled, if the escapee's last letter hadn't been gnawing on him.

The messy-haired student frowned. "Come to personally deliver your lecture, have you?" Sirius' smile wavered.

"What's that, Harry?"

The Gryffindor stared at the sculptures and paintings adorning the art room. "To yell at me for running off after the weapons." He spoke, hardening his eyes. "For dragging yet another set of people into danger." A considerable pause spanned between the pair, and Harry knew Sirius would begin his rant any minute.

But surprisingly, "No. I don't need to tell you what you did was wrong, even if you did help the school and cause a bit of mischief." He heard the amused tone of the innocent wizard's voice; Harry couldn't

help but grin faintly. "I actually came to spend Christmas here." Sirius plinked a few notes on the piano at the center of the room. "This place is more cheerful than mine, you know. No screeching portraits of bigoted relatives, that's for sure."

"You're staying here."

"No need to sound so excited, Harry," he sneeringly teased.

"So you're the Christmas guest." Sirius shrugged.

"I'll be the only one staying here, yes, but Ron and Ginny's parents as well as Fred and George'll be here tomorrow for supper." Harry narrowed his eyes in puzzlement. "Not sure if Bill can make it. But Remus will be here as well."

"What about your mission?" Harry gauged Sirius' hesitant reaction, crossing his arms in the process. The wizard's normally jovial eyes were rather uncertain, and Sirius was tapping on that deep note for quite some time. "Sirius?"

His godfather cautiously raised his eyes to Harry's. The Gryffindor was now befuddled. What would make Sirius look at him with that expression? With reluctance? "About that, Harry," he frowningly began. "I — "

"Of all the . . . " Kaltag's rising voice drifted into the art room. "You named me after Snape?"

Harry's eyes widened at the statement. It was his denied guardian's cringe that brought him out of his shock. "Guess Kaltag's found out who his godfather is." Harry's neck ached from whipping to Sirius' direction so quickly. "Old Snively'll be thrilled. Maybe he'll finally wash his hair from the excitement." Harry struggled not to gape.

"You knew?"

Sirius' smug expression soured into realization as he shut the lid on the baby grand. "Perhaps we should adjourn to a more comfortable area." Harry allowed himself to be led away from the stifled quarreling of father and son, toward the sitting room under the stairs. He hadn't been to this cozy room yet, but a fire was already dancing in the hearth, warming the room as they sat before it. The room was

quite spacious, and housed the decorated Christmas tree Harry had forgotten about. Sinking down into the chair, Harry's eyes never left Sirius' jarring movements.

Under Harry's penetrating gaze, Sirius seemed quite unsettled. He restlessly shifted in his armchair as Harry's eyes lingered on him. After his eighth attempt to get more comfortable, the Animagus loosened up. Harry lifted his brow. "Comfortable?" he dryly inquired.

"Quite."

The fire crackled as silence settled between the pair. "Snape is Kaltag's godfather?" Sirius covered his face with a lean hand.

"Dreadful, isn't it?" He shook his head lightly. Harry fingered his jumper as Sirius sobered. How could anyone — how could Spiridon, the evil-annihilating general — pick Snape to godfather his son? The last person Harry would consider godfather material was Snape.

"How did that happen?" He breathed, weighing his head in his hands. The wizard on the run bent his fingers around his chin, considering the younger man.

"Trust, I suppose," he tapered his gray-blue eyes. Harry looked skeptical. "Spiridon and Snape have been friends for quite some time. Since summer before your mother, father, Remus and I left Hogwarts. Apparently, old Snivellus applied for a potion-making job on Olympus. Got the boot because he looked dark. Don't blame them." Sirius snorted quietly to himself as Harry yanked a thread on his jersey. "Anyway, Spiridon was there at the same time, doing work as usual. He was furious because of the intolerance showed by the proctor. Ashamed, the proctor gave Snivelly the job, but the twit refused. Spiridon befriended him anyhow."

Harry gathered his brows. "Why doesn't Kaltag remember him? Or why wasn't he told?"

"Goes back to the old Ministry laws. No associations with Celestials." Both wizards frowned. "Snape couldn't see him, and because of both wars, the triplets' memory was altered." Harry's frown intensified at that. "Athena and Spiridon didn't want their children remembering any of the awfulness they endured. And

Snape didn't want Voldemort to come after Kaltagonus." The sixth year absently nodded.

"Protection."

"Yes, it always does come back to that, doesn't it?" His eyes glimmered in the hearth light. "Protection." Raising his hand slowly, Harry automatically grazed his scar. Sirius' orbs were heavy with something Harry couldn't read, and the Animagus sighed gruffly. "It's time I come clean, Harry."

The words were something he truly did not expect, and they hit him with such a force, Harry snapped straight in his chair. Sirius did not look at all like his impish self as he toyed with a stone from the side table display. "I know much more than I let on." He pressed.

Harry inclined his head, suddenly feeling quite clammy. "Yeah, I know. You're an Order member — "

"I'm not talking about the Order, Harry," the ragged man grimly disrupted. Harry's frown deepened. "I'm talking about a ... higher authority." Narrowing his eyes, the Gryffindor weighed his choices.

"You can't possibly be working for the Ministry," he frowned. With relief, he noted Sirius shook his head. "Then who?"

"I — and Remus too," Green eyes constricted. "Work for — with, work with Spiridon." Sirius dragged his hand through his matted hair. "We've worked with him since the beginning of the first war." Despite the confession, Harry remained confused.

"Oh...kay?" he drew his eyebrows in confusion. "I'm not getting you, Sirius." The Animagus sighed, moving to stand before the fire. Anxiety seemed to be coming off of the man in waves. Harry still couldn't understand what any of this had to do with him. "It isn't like working with a Celestial is a crime these days." Sirius was staring at a black-figure vase atop the mantel.

"Your parents, Remus and I joined the Order right out of our final year in Hogwarts. Dumbledore was trying to gather allies in case this war turned out to be quite ... unpleasant. We were working daily, even nightly to recruit willing wizards and witches. We rarely received any willing participants. To them, war automatically

equaled death, and they were willing to take their chances with staying quiet." He shook his head as Harry nestled into the easy chair. "When we drafted all we could convince, many didn't think it was enough. No one knew how large Voldemort's army was. And besides defeating Grindelwald and managing a school and the Order, Dumbledore was quite soft when it came to managing a full weapons militia. That's where Spiridon came in.

"He was invited as a diplomat from the Celestials. By that time, the War of Aesechylus had reached its pinnacle. Celestials were dying, and their weapons and forces could only do so much. The Celestials needed help; so they turned to their venerable allies for assistance. In turn, they promised to help us with our issue."

"Voldemort." Sirius nodded, scratching his stubble.

"To make a long story short, Spiridon approached us after a few Order meetings. He heard of Remus' attempt to rally the forest creatures, and my death-defying attempt to seek a spy within the Death Eater ranks." Harry shook his head and sniggered at the wizard's dramatic statement. "He offered us an opportunity of a life time. He offered us jobs. Remus would work with maintaining the peace between Celestial beasts—an ideal job where his lycanthropy didn't matter; and I would handle intelligence." A silly smile graced the Animagus' gaunt face and Harry had to snicker. At Sirius' scowl, Harry stifled his laughter.

"I'm sorry," he wheezed. "Sort of hard to picture anything with you and intelligence." His glare strengthened. Composing himself, Harry merrily grinned. "I'm joking; I'm sorry. Go on." With a huff, the godfather dropped into his chair.

"As I was saying, I handled intelligence. It was my job to help track the dark readings going on in Britain. Much like what Smythe Enterprises does today. With this, we helped to stop many incursions before they got out of hand. The drawback to all of this: only Remus, Spiridon, and I knew. This was so hard to keep from your father. He was my best friend, my—my brother." His eyes grew overcast with remorse. "I never kept anything from him." He shook his head regretfully, masking his face behind a curtain of dark hair. "For all the Order knew, I was working in the Department of Magical Cooperation. I was out of town that often. I think James and Lily suspected I was an Unspeakable of some sort, because I always

remained reserved about what I actually did and why I was never at the office.

"If I wasn't with your parents, I was on Olympus. Remus didn't quite have the schedule I had, as he usually forayed only days before the full moon. But we both had a chance to study Celestial culture well. Not many wizards were chosen to work with Celestials, despite our friendly ties. Working alongside the Battalion was one of the rare highlights of my life, right under being named your godfather, Harry." the Gryffindor softly smiled, earning a grin from the wizard. "But things always take a turn for the worse."

Harry lowered his brows. "What happened?"

"Fudge happened. He wasn't fond of Celestials. You as well as I know the Ministry is far from perfect. Fudge was fuming; he could instate laws that controlled what he considered 'beasts'. Werewolves, house elves, centaurs: Anything that wasn't a full witch or wizard. But Celestials weren't creatures; and neither were they lawfully wizards. They had their own government, their own leader, and he was furious that he couldn't control them. So he did the next best thing when they offered assistance. He shirked them." Harry swallowed at Sirius' almost nonchalant tone.

"If he couldn't hold sway over them, they wouldn't be allowed to interact with us. The British Ministry is a great ally to have. The smaller ministries didn't want to lose them; therefore, they acquiesced with Fudge's terms, but never officially altered their regulations. Of course, the Americans were defiant, but they rarely rear Celestials." Sirius issued a considerably tired sigh and Harry realized they should have made or asked for tea.

"Back then, I seldom did field work, as it increased my chances of exposure. But since I'm not exactly welcome to civilization, I've taken Spiridon up on his offer." He briefly smiled. "Remus and I reprised our duties, more quietly than we did over a decade ago. This is why I've been away on missions, Harry. Why I couldn't talk or write often."

"Why you look like Crookshanks' scratching post..." Sirius inclined his head a fraction.

"Almost like I'm on the run again. But this time, I must to be doubly careful. Shackbolt can only throw the scent off of me for so long, and Spiridon can only do so much. Now, I am a criminal in two worlds." Furrowing his brows, Sirius shifted in his seat. "After Voldemort's first fall, I went to Azkaban, of course. Remus was so distraught over the death of your parents, that he abandoned his duties. And over a decade later ... " He exhaled sharply, scrubbing his face.

"But, Fudge has been minister since Voldemort's first down fall? That isn't fair."

"When are politics ever fair?" The older wizard countered with a dour smile. "He became minister during the first war and took a sabbatical after the next election. Tried his luck right before you began Hogwarts, and he won again." He sternly eyed the young Gryffindor, folding his hands in his lap. "Harry, I know Hermione and Ron are your best friends," Harry narrowed his eyes somewhat. "But I must ask you not to tell them that Remus and I work for the Celestials. So far, only those in Spiridon's inner circle know that we work for Olympus. Word cannot get out to anyone." At this, the seeker tapered his eyes suspiciously.

"Then why did you tell me?" Sirius didn't answer right away, and appeared to be considering his answer.

"Because you deserve an explanation," he decisively stated. "Because I owe it to your father Harry, for keeping this from him." Sirius' eyes glided to the roaring fire, implying the discussion's end. Tracing his tingling scar with a finger, Harry followed his eyes to the orange flames. Both wizards sat in pensive silence until Harry departed for his bedchambers.

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He squinted his eyes in fascination as he observed the two school powers — Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall — heatedly conversing near the lake's edge by a tree. Dusk had settled nicely and the surface of the lake wrinkled in the wind. He couldn't hear what they were saying as the sound was muted, but he knew.

McGonagall had her square spectacles placed on the tip of her nose, her cheeks coloring in quite a shade of rouge to match her frilly pink

robes. Dumbledore appeared jovial as ever as the head of house groused about how the giant squid ended up in her bathtub. Dumbledore's response was a mere grin, a wiggle of his crooked nose, and a contribution of lemon drops.

The wind blustered fiercely in tune with McGonagall's anger, but Harry felt nothing, not even the beech tree he leaned against. The squid glided merrily across the surface with Myrtle lounging across his tentacles as McGonagall again began her tirade. Harry could see her face creasing with every passing moment as Dumbledore offered her another smile and a lemon drop.

Myrtle was now doing the backstroke across the dark lake as the squid splattered water toward the professors. McGonagall hopped in rage as Dumbledore hoisted his hands in delight and offered the squid a lemon drop. Harry tilted his head as McGonagall began hacking off tree branches, with one of Fred and George's trick rubber chicken wands brandished in hand. The falling branches turned to dozens of housecats, who instead of falling into the dark lake, sprouted wings and flew off. Dumbledore was disappointed and fruitlessly beckoned to the felines, desperately promising them bowls of lemon drops. It was as a gray cat landed near the base of their tree, that Harry noticed they were not alone.

While the professors stuck to their mindless tasks, Harry padded closer to them, nearing the dark, unfamiliar figure. The hooded stranger stroked the cat once before allowing it, too, to fly away. Closer still, Harry was a step away from the person. He still couldn't hear anything, and nothing about them seemed familiar. He was about to confront the outsider when suddenly, the person whipped around, boring into Harry. Harry couldn't see anything, as the darkness of the hood extended to the foreigner's face.

The blank space where the face should have been was puzzling. But as Harry swatted a cat from his path, he noticed for the first time the brilliant pair of spots in the faceless dark. Brilliant golden dots; intense golden eyes . . . .

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His bony fingertips clutched the moist scales in a tolerant stroke. The serpent's tongue flicked out to taste her master's pensive brooding, as he once again traced a finger over her back. It had



been the same scene for weeks: the overlord would send his men out, the men would fail their tasks, and her master would be angry. After his rage was freed, he would hole himself in the dusty office, idly stroking his wild beast for hours in silence. But the serpent could always sense his thoughtful menacing. And tonight, it was at its highest rigidity.

A nail snagged on one of the snake's scales and the animal hissed in annoyance. "Forgive me, Nagini." His icy voice hissed coldly. Nagini coiled tighter around herself as the dark sorcerer faced the opening door. A putrid scent assailed the room, already rank with stale dust and mustiness. Deep, throaty snarling rumbled the dust off the broken desk as armor clanked and heavy footsteps approached.

"Lord Voldemort," the rich tone acknowledged. Resonant growls were heard as the Dark Lord finally faced his guests. Mystikos bowed stiffly and kept his hand on his rapier. "You requested my presence?"

Voldemort paused in his massaging, allowing the serpent to slither off the windowsill and out of view. His fingers scraped the dusty ledge as the guests waited for an answer. A persistent growl menaced his thoughts as he blinked at the departing darkness. "You wanted the Dark Prince here, what do you want?"

"Hryczuk." Mystikos admonished. Voldemort narrowed his red eyes.

"Minister Fudge," he halted briefly to wipe his sullied fingers, "has been awfully quiet of late. My spies have not heard much from him. The Ministry is of no threat to my organization, especially with such an incompetent leader as Cornelius Fudge." Adjusting his hood, the dark wizard faced his collaborator. "However, it is time to move ahead with our plans."

Anton lifted a scruffy brow. "Go to the source, Tom? Are you sure?" Voldemort scowled at the use of his birth name and thinned his eyes.

"No. That plan is already in motion." He quietly informed. "Go to his confidants. Those most trusted in his internal circle. Reap what ever plans and information Fudge is keeping silent." The hybrids and their superior bowed their heads in acceptance. With a dark smirk, Voldemort's eyes seemed to smolder in balefulness.

"Do what you must to get what we require."

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Heaving a groan, Harry pushed his glasses onto his nose and tossed the quilt aside. He breezed by a startled Hedwig and flung his dressing gown on haphazardly, throwing open the door. He had to tell Ron. Or Hermione. Or both. And Sirius! Sirius was here. Dashing across the bright corridor to the door just across the way, Harry rapped on it evenly. "Ron!" he whispered roughly, careful not to awaken any other sleeper. "Ron, open up!" He was beginning to think Ron had gone down to breakfast when the door swung open to reveal quite a peeved Weasley.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but d'you think we could celebrate Christmas a bit later, Harry? This time zone thing is bizarre. But I promise you the gifts will still be there." He grouched, narrowing his weary eyes.

"Sorry, but I had a vision. Voldemort's planning something." Ron immediately livened up, forgetting his previous exhaustion. He motioned for Harry to come in as he himself left the room and shut the door quietly. Harry gazed about Ron's less than neat dwellings and sat at the edge of the bed in the goldenrod room. His scar prickled, but otherwise hadn't flared up. He had barely brushed a soiled sock away from his robe when the door swung open to admit a wild-haired Ron and a stern-looking Hermione.

"We've been here less than a week and you've all ready trashed the place. Very appreciative of you, Ron." The redhead ignored the clever girl's statement as he closed the door. They each took seats around the room and listened intently as Harry filled them in about his vision.

"What do you think it means?" he asked them after his account, their faces steadily emptying of color. "Or worse, what do you think they'll do?" Hermione pensively considered the details as Ron and Harry sat on pins and needles.

"He can't get the weapons," she started, absently clutching her dressing gown, "so he's going after Fudge now."

Ron harrumphed in approval, crossing his arms. "Well, good luck to him."

"Ron!" Hermione gasped in admonishment.

The prefect shrugged heatedly and lowered his brows. "Both of them are nutters, Hermione. Who're we to stop them from going at it? If they destroy each other, then we've nothing to worry about, do we?" The witch merely scowled, saying nothing. Harry remained awfully quiet. He would admit, he didn't like Fudge; but he didn't want to see the minister die by a madman's wand. With a flat smile Hermione shot Harry a look.

"Happy Christmas, by the way." The sixth year returned the dull sentiments as the trio of Gryffindors pondered what was to come. "You're sure you don't remember anything else?" Shaking his head firmly, Harry crossed his arms with a deep frown creasing his brow.

"D'you think he's trying to trick me again?" he murmured, not meeting their questioning eyes. "Is he trying to lead me back to the Ministry to finish the job from last year?" Hermione shook her head negatively.

"I doubt it. Fudge probably hasn't taken any chances and has added additional security to the Ministry."

"Yeah. This time around, the wards would probably warn them when You-Know-Who is standing on their welcome mat." Ron mocked.

"But he isn't going there again," Harry wrinkled his brows as he reflected over the reverie. "He's sending Mystikos to Fudge's most trusted confidants. Who would that be?"

With a frown marring her face, Hermione slowly shook her head. "Maybe, Mrs. Fudge?" She offered with a resigned expression. "His sons? Umbridge?" Harry opened his mouth to question the bookworm about Fudge's additional secretaries and undersecretaries when Ron's door swung open. The rough black head of hair gave Sirius away, and the wizard greeted the silent room with a smile.

"There you are, Harry." His robes sagged pitifully on him as he entered the guest room. Hermione and Ron looked at the Animagus in shock.

"What are you doing here?" Ron inquired, his bemused face identical to Hermione's. Sirius lifted his brow and tilted his head.

"Even innocent convicts on the run deserve a vacation." Before the Gryffindors probed further, Sirius took a few steps backward and poked his head out of the room. "Remus, they're over here." The trio remained silent as Sirius surveyed the room with a comical expression. "Bit early in the holiday for vandalism, isn't it, Ron?" The redhead colored in embarrassment as Hermione looked on complacently.

Sirius stood beside the door as Lupin strolled in, his light brown hair spackled with gray, but his eyes twinkling in satisfaction. "Hermione, Ron, Harry." He addressed politely. The three muttered yuletide greetings in return.

Hermione decided to break the awkward silence that followed, with an overexcited beam. "So, you're our guests for the holidays, then?"

Lupin smiled placidly and brushed soot from his worn out robes. "I believe your parents, Ron," the redhead's eyes widened quite nicely, "as well as your brothers, Fred and George, will be spending the evening with us." Harry gave him a sympathetic look as he lightly scowled to his wrinkled linens. "How are N.E.W.T. practices?"

Hermione avidly went on to inform them of what they learned, but complained about beginning N.E.W.T. practice exams in the spring. "Not nearly early enough if you ask me." She harrumphed, sinking into the bed. Ron and Harry rolled their eyes at the witch's antics, while Lupin appeared fairly impressed.

"Harry, are you all right? You've been awfully quiet." He mentioned, sparking Sirius' interest as well. Harry noticed he had been rather quiet since the wizards entered the room. At Hermione's grim look, he sighed and turned to them.

"Is there any chance that the ministry is open today?" Lupin responded with a questioning look.

"Why, are you hoping Shackbolt will get that appreciative fruit basket you sent him?" Sirius ribbed, grinning widely. Harry strained a grin but shook his head.

"Just curious." Hermione chided the seeker with a dissatisfied glower. "I wanted to know if ministry workers worked on holidays. Not looking forward to that, you know." Her piercing look intensified. Sirius and Lupin exchanged thoughtful looks before shrugging and nodding respectively.

"Few wizards and witches work on the holidays, yes, but not all of them."

"Would Fudge be working today?" The dark-haired man snorted.

"Of course not. He sees no reason why he needs to work during the holidays." Harry nodded quietly to himself looking away. Should he have told them the truth? Hermione's dark look was unnerving. What would happen if he did? Or worse, what would happen if he didn't?

Before he came to a conscious decision, the words already escaped him. "I had a vision last night."

Black and Lupin stood in stunned silence before they converged. "What happened?"

"What did he do?"

"Did you see anyone?"

"Harry, how could you keep this to yourself?"

"Are you all right?"

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled sharply. "He was speaking to Mystikos and—and those creatures of his," Lupin's brow creased. "He was serious. They're trying to get information from ministry workers." He finally looked at the alert wizards. "Fudge's confidants." Again, the two friends looked at one another as Harry regarded Hermione's introspective expression.

Ron spoke up. "You don't think they would go to the ministry in broad daylight, do you?" he inquired in skepticism. "They can't be that thick."

Lupin shook his head. "No. They would need the cover of night." Sirius frowned, staring at his godson.

"Did Voldemort say anything else? Whom he was going after in particular?" Reviewing the vision, carefully, Harry shook his head.

"No, but he did say they've already started another plan. He didn't say what it was, though."

Lupin blinked a few times in abstraction before he, too sighed. "We can't do much as we're in another country," he began, shoving his hands into his robes, "but we can try to alert Dumbledore of this news."

The Gryffindors broke off in silence, each wondering about what was to happen in the next few hours. As Ron departed the bed, grumbling to himself as he tidied his room, there was a knock on the door before a head of red hair poked in. "Am I interrupting a reunion of some sort?" The Being inquired, considering the Order members.

"Yes." Sirius shortly spoke. "Get out."

"Sirius." Lupin reproved. The Animagus shrugged with a smirk.

"I was only joking." Kaltag inclined his head at his housemates in salutation. Harry noted the lycanthrope squinted hard at the Celestial, a quivering frown blighting his face.

"Is that..." he narrowed his eyes further, angling his head. "Taggy Smythe?" Kaltagonus immediately froze, as did the rest of the sixth years. Ron dropped the cloak he was holding. A harsh glare in place, the Paraffin eyed Lupin.

"Don't—you—dare." He warned. Lupin smiled capriciously as Sirius smirked in amusement.

"Red hair and all gangly, it must be." The former professor nodded to himself.

Upraising a brow in hilarity, Ron repeated, "'Taggy'?"

Kaltag turned his glare on the keeper. "Say it again, and you'll be choking on your tongue." Ron broke into peals of laughter as Harry looked away in mirth. Hermione understandingly smiled in the menacing Celestial's direction and smoothed her mantle.

"I think it's very ende—"

"Don't, Hermione," he warned, narrowing his eyes. "Don't finish that sentence." Sirius joined Ron in laughter as Lupin gave the displeased student an apologetic look.

"I imagine that name sprang to mind somewhat subconsciously when I recognized you."

"Thank you, Dr. Freud." He retorted deprecatingly. Lupin appeared mildly confused, as did Sirius; Hermione simply folded her brow. Ron composed himself, although a handful of snorts still eluded him. Sirius beamed and clapped the annoyed Being on his back.

"We were only having you on, Kaltagonus." He merely raised a cynical brow. "Besides, with all the good news you received yesterday, I thought you could use a laugh."

The boy's scowl only deepened. "How much are they offering for your capture again?"

Shaking his head at the Being's annoyance, Lupin lightly smiled and motioned toward the corridor. "Let's give the man a last meal before you turn him over to the ministry, yes?" He didn't wait for the others to follow him.

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Christmas morning lazily passed, whilst the Gryffindors enjoyed their gifts. Other than the condensed study guide from Hermione, Harry basked in the barrels of sweets he received from Ron, a tin full of Chocoballs from Hermione, and an array of foreign candies from the Aristopolis. Mrs. Weasley sent her normal package of mince pies, homemade fudge and jumpers for the lot of them.

After demanding the teenagers tell him what happened the night they found the weapons, Sirius taught Harry a handy spell to use for the Marauder's Map. He really wished he'd been told of this earlier, so they wouldn't've given chase through the castle to find the secret entrances. Sirius spelled the map so it would take voice and wand commands, so Harry would now be able to find the most direct or complicated path to a certain destination. "The map can lead you where you want to go, but unless the password is provided to you, you still need a password to get through enchanted entranceways."

Hermione frowned when he also began showing Harry how to charm the map with a Cloaking Charm, but did not voice her displeasure. The tree barely had gifts left beneath it, most belonging to the absent Spiridon. Breakfast and lunch was light, as Erastus informed them he was keeping it such to make room for the veritable feast to come at dinner.

Harry found himself with Ron and the Celestial brothers in the sitting room mid-evening.

He found sitting around watching Ron stuff his face with sweets wasn't in the least bit soothing. It only made him quite anxious: his mind continued to drift toward the Ministry, of all things. What was going to happen? Who would Voldemort attack? Would Dumbledore be able to hold it off this time? Why was he sitting here doing nothing? His scar had tingled all morning and afternoon, just enough to remind him of its presence.

The meditative hush was interrupted by Kaltag's stiff assertion, "This Christmas has been rather boring." Harry couldn't find it in himself to disagree, as did Ron. He began picking at the fibers of the couch edgily when Starbuck snorted.

"At least this Christmas is far better than last year's."

Kaltag groaned tetchily and directed a glare at his brother. "Oh, don't even start." Harry's interest peaked.

"What happened?" He inquired, hoping the tale would keep his mind off of the Ministry.

Kaltag paused, rubbing his eyes for something to do as he spoke. "Some nut—"



"Chiron's defense apprentice." Starbuck corrected, smirking at the older Celestial's disapproving look.

"It's always the defense ones, isn't it?" Ron brilliantly assessed.

"—Tried to kidnap us." The Being finished with a frown.

"Correction, tried to kidnap Kaltag." Starbuck rectified shrewdly. "And succeeded."

Harry lowered his brows, slanting his head. "At Aripedes? That's a bit bold."

"No, but it would've been a lot simpler if he did," the prefect answered contemptuously. "That would've been the smart thing to do." His twin brother scooted forward, leaning elbows to his knees.

"He showed up here, lured Kaltag out of the manor and snatched him." Starbuck finished the Celestial's tale gaily. "He spent the whole day at dad's office."

With a menacing look, Kaltag griped, "He didn't lure me."

Starbuck narrowed eyes held skepticism. "What would you call it?" The sixth-year Paraffin opened his mouth and paused. Slitting his eyes, he looked away from the telekinetic Being's exultant gaze.

"In any case, Christmas is the time to be with the one you love. Too bad I had to settle for dad that year." Rolling his eyes, Harry tried to ignore the boy's irritability.

"Why'd you go with him?" Ron probed, popping a Jelly Slug in his mouth. Pursing his lips, Kaltag considered the question.

"He said he forgot to return a few of my things—which he did, and I followed him to the front. Next thing I knew, I was in some soggy room." He shrugged, settling into his chair. "An hour later, dad comes swarming in with the cavalry and Battalion members are arresting him. Spent the rest of the holiday stuck in the office."

He leaned his chin on his hand as he stared at the ornamented tree. Studying the quiet pair of Celestials, Harry asked, "Where is he

now?" The younger of the Smythes shrugged, taking an offered cream-filled chocolate from Ron.

"That was the last anyone had seen of him," he spoke swirling his tongue over the candy. "Tag thinks dad might've killed him." The Being snorted, murmuring under his breath, "I wouldn't put it past him."

"I think he's probably been imprisoned somewhere," Starbuck emphasized, looking at his brother objectionably. Harry declined Ron's offering of Every Flavour Beans. "Where no one can find him."

Leery eyes floated to the blonde Celestial. "Who'd think to find him in the Underworld?"

"The Underworld! Say, that sounds like an enjoyable place." A familiar voice sounded from the entrance. The boys' eyes rushed to the identical, smiling prank wizards.

"Lots of dark spots—"

"With dead people—"

"—and eerie sounds—"

"—like Percy singing in the shower—"

"—or Ron's snoring—"

"Hey!" The Gryffindor prefect protested, aggravation creasing his brow.

"—and tons of interesting people—"

"—everywhere, with—"

"—gawky heads, and—"

"—shifty eyes—"

"—Mad-Eye'd feel right at home." Fred and George ended their double act, staring at the Beings with wide eyes.

"Oh, my." Kaltag responded in an overwhelmed quality. Ron looked at the grinning twins suspiciously.

"When did you come in?"

"Minutes ago," Fred answered, adjusting his scaly jacket. "Traveled by—"

"—A series of Floos—"

"—And Portkeys." They ended simultaneously. George started by pushing Ron aside to sit down. "Can't be too careful. Not the best—"

"—Form of travel—"

"—But successful." He finished with a relieved smirk.

"Please stop that." Kaltag snapped at the pair, dividing the gaze between the two of them. "I'm getting confused." Harry knew only trouble would ensue when the Weasley twins gave each other brief looks and stood at the same time. They each seized one of the Paraffin's hands and shook it just as vigorously.

"He's Fred," George motioned at his brother.

"And he's George," Fred jerked his head at George. Kaltag's bewildered gaze darted among the multiples. Harry instantly felt sorry for the beleaguered student.

"Er, Fred—I mean George—I..." He stared at the two with puzzled looks before shaking his head. The twins continued shaking his hands energetically with matching smiles. "I give up."

"Not that hard," Fred insisted in a mischievously solemn manner. "I'm Fred—"

"—I'm George," George added. "He's Fred."

"He's George." George copied. "And we're—"

"Giving Kaltag a headache, thanks." The irritable Being interjected, removing his grip from the eager wizards'. Starbuck beamed and

allowed the twins to engage him in their boggling introductions. His twin had a slight wince on his face as they began once more.

"Knock it off, you two." Ron glowered, taking another chocolate. Harry stared at the twins in amusement as they turned to their brother and began sifting through his collection of sweets.

"Mum and dad are talking to your father," Fred stated, chewing on the end of a licorice wand.

"With Lupin and Sirius." George included. His look immediately soured. "Mum's told us that Percy has a good chance of coming here." Ron didn't look too pleased. Harry understood their anger at their older brother. He left it well enough alone.

"Dad hasn't said a word about it, though." The dour Fred inserted as if that settled the matter. Harry vaguely wondered if Mr. Weasley broke whatever he may have been holding when his wife informed him.

Kaltag moved to set the fire in the hearth as the boys sorted through Ron's stockpile to stave themselves until dinner. Upon hearing the faint rattle of pots in the kitchen, Harry realized it was nearly time for dinner. Speaking of Erastus, he noted both the butler and the eldest Smythe offspring were unusually silent around one another; and he hadn't seen Spiridon since the first day he arrived in Greece. Kaltag had also been standoffish about what had happened after he'd abruptly left the rest of them on the landing last night. Whatever had resulted, Kaltag seemed to mask his true feelings quite well.

The room was suddenly crowded when Hermione walked in with book in hand and the other girls lagging behind. Ginny nodded at the twins and stood by the entrance. "Thought we heard familiar voices." The identical wizards greeted Nikola in the same way they introduced themselves to her brothers, when a tinkling sound rang through the room. Harry's hand was on his wand in a split second before a voice echoed in the corridor.

"Dinner is served." The twins scrambled up and made for the left exit as the Smythes followed after. Chiding himself for his edginess, Harry removed his hand and trailed after. The scent of food hit his nostrils as soon as he crossed the threshold. Harry wondered if there was a blocking charm on the sitting room exits to keep the

bouquet of delicacies out. Ron sniffed at the air eagerly as he stared at the feasting room.

"Smells good." he heard one of the twins mutter. Before they passed the drawing room, Harry found himself enveloped in a tight hug, his breathing obstructed by red hair.

"Oh, Harry! It's so good to see you, dear." Mrs. Weasley piped, grasping his cheeks between her ample fingers.

"Happy Christmas, Mrs. Weasley." He spoke as she grabbed his hands and measured him carefully. With a warm smile, she greeted Hermione equally, and fussed over Ginny and Ron. Greeting the Smythe children with firm hugs and motherly compliments, Mrs. Weasley seemed to shower each child with affection. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry as the spectacled wizard rubbed his forehead.

Mr. Weasley clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder and greeted him and the rest with nods and handshakes. Spiridon, Lupin and Sirius followed after. After gently pulling his animated wife in the direction of the dining hall, the group followed the mouth-watering scents into the large room against the east wall.

The table was set sophisticatedly, with countless dishes adorning the holly-festooned table. Sixteen chairs surrounded the table, beckoning the hungry group to sit and feast. Fred and George quickly made for the nearest seat before Molly sharply scolded them for their lack of manners. Harry noted her eyes were depressing, even as they viewed the steaming servings. Gripping the back of her chair lightly, Mrs. Weasley looked out of the wall of windows. "Shouldn't we wait for Percy?" She suggested quietly.

Mr. Weasley's face darkened considerably, while their children frowned. Hermione exchanged looks with Harry as Mrs. Weasley stared at the pair of empty chairs toward Ginny's seat. Placing a stiff hand on his wife's arm, Mr. Weasley's forced smile gave his next words empty meaning. "I'm sure he'll be along, Molly. He wouldn't intentionally overlook Christmas supper." With glassy eyes, Mrs. Weasley nodded to herself and allowed her husband to pull out her chair. Finally, the others sat down, but in silence. Spiridon gestured for Erastus to join them as the butler pulled off his white gloves.

Everyone stared at the different dishes—some Harry could recognize, others he gave up on—and marveled at the skill of the misleadingly frail hands that cooked the banquet. There were four—Ron and Harry all but salivated—four different kinds of meats and poultry, and Harry lost count of the exotic and familiar dishes. Even Molly looked impressed. Sirius gave Harry a ravenous grin as his fingers twitched in anticipation. Hermione only seemed pleased that a house elf hadn't slaved to cook the yuletide meal tonight.

"Well? I didn't spend thirteen hours in a kitchen for decorative purposes." Erastus broke their astounded gawks. "Tuck in, or I daresay the dogs will be dining in style tonight . . . ." Forks and knives clattered noisily as the household began to feast. "Cheers." The elderly Celestial raised his wine glass with a crinkled smile.

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Ron groaned blissfully as he pat his swollen stomach. "I don't think I'll be able to eat until next month." Hermione snorted at the statement, shaking her head skeptically.

"Somehow, I doubt that." George winked at his sister.

Dinner was magnificent, as anyone would have guessed, with Ron and Sirius as the top two eating their fill. Harry only had a chance to sample three of the four meats, choosing to test the side dishes instead. He added several Greek dishes to his list of favorite foods. Dessert was divine, and he really wished dinner wasn't cut short.

Halfway through dinner, the mood seemed to become rather depressing. Everyone was having a fine time, until Molly kept glancing at the clock and the empty chairs at the table's end, as if expecting Percy to just appear in one and begin stuffing his face. Arthur noticed her anxiety and frowned deeply, setting his custard aside. The Weasley children went on as if nothing was amiss, decidedly ignoring the fact their disloyal brother was to arrive. But he never did. When Mrs. Weasley nearly broke into tears of his obvious rebuttal, Spiridon called an end to the festivities and politely excused them. The Smythes grudgingly assisted Erastus with dishwashing and leftovers duty, and were still absent since they disappeared into the kitchen.

"I could live here," Ron gazed about with a calm smile. "With Erastus' cooking, and so much space, I can definitely see it."

"Great! We've been waiting for you to move out." Fred encouraged.

"Now we can convert your room into our second lab."

"We need the space soon."

"So, when are you moving?" Ron merely sent his brothers a withering look.

"Don't get your hopes up." He mumbled, lazing in his seat. It was too early in the evening to retire, and Harry was quite tired of losing chess matches to Ron. Hermione was propped against the center table, cramming her small writing on parchment for her History of Magic essay. It seemed she had forced Ginny into it too, because the flame-haired girl had her Charms book before her. Unwrapping a Chocolate Frog from his robes, Ron stuffed the struggling frog in his mouth and flung the card at the twins. "Is there anything entertaining to do? Besides homework?" He cut in when Hermione opened her mouth to speak. Giving her fellow prefect an icy stare, Hermione returned to her essay.

Ginny looked up from her essay. "Snowball fight?" She suggested. This brought a negative headshake from Ron.

"Too dark. Mum would have a fit."

"Hmf." George droned with a naughty grin. "All the more reason to do it."

Harry frowned, scratching his forehead. "Gobstones?"

"Be serious, Ron. Gobstones." One of the twins ridiculed, shaking his head. Ron narrowed his eyes.

"Don't see you coming up with anything better."

"We could test some of our new products."

"Yeah, there are some prototypes that need experimenting."

"You are not blowing anything up in Mr. Smythe's house!" Hermione nagged in an affronted pitch. "You're guests!"

"No, you're guests." Fred corrected mockingly. "We can't get thrown out if we blow something up." He cheerily went on. Hermione's eyes darkened.

"You wouldn't." The pair merely looked at one another wickedly.

Furrowing his brow, Ron crossed his arms. "No, we are not doing any of your stupid pranks. They'll get us all chucked out." The joking wizards sputtered indignantly.

"Stupid'?"

"I think not!" With an exasperated groan, Ginny shut her book and gathered her things, marching huffily out of the sitting room. The Weasley boys glared at one another. "Now look what you've done."

They began to bicker, earning piercing looks from both Hermione and Harry. Ron stood along with the twins, and the other Gryffindors were grateful when they moved their argument elsewhere. Hermione resumed her tidy scrawl as Harry massaged his aching forehead; a headache was slowly starting to spread through his head. Letting his eyes fall shut, Harry kneaded his stinging temple, willing the dull pain away; for once, he had hoped this was just a regular headache.

The pause of Hermione's scoring quill caught his attention. "Are you all right?" She tentatively inquired. Opening his eyes, the young wizard gave his good friend a drowsy smile. Returning the gesture, Hermione stared at him in concern. "Maybe you should go to bed. It's been a taxing day." Harry found nothing about this day to be taxing. Perhaps she was referring to how he had started the day with his vision.

"No, Hermione," he forced himself to say determinedly, though his voice did not quite sound it. "I'm f—OUCH!" He thought he felt a surge of contentment before he was aware of the fire's thick blanket of warmth.

Hermione stood so quickly she dropped her books and essay with a dampened thud. In a moment, she was at Harry's side as he scraped the scar in bewilderment. "What did you see?" Harry



blinked, still scrubbing at his scar. It had only flared for a second, but nothing more than a dull stitch remained.

"Nothing," he answered honestly. Hermione's eyes narrowed. "I didn't see anything—I just felt a sharp pain. It startled me." She didn't seem convinced.

"Did anything else happen? Do you want me to get Sirius?" Yes, Sirius. Words failing him for the time being, Harry only nodded. Hermione dashed out of the room as if she had been set afire.

What had the twinge been about? What had Voldemort done? Had his plan succeeded? Harry gulped, hoping he wouldn't have to find out. After all, he hadn't seen anything; and he thought that was for the better. He didn't think he'd be able to handle the sight of mangled bodies on Christmas evening.

He wondered where the Weasleys had gotten to as he was suddenly aware of the silence: there wasn't any arguing. And how long would it take Hermione to bring Sirius here? It wasn't as if the Animagus had gone off into Athens at this time of night. With careful consideration, he realized Sirius and Lupin and Ron's parents might have been in Spiridon's office. Hermione would never look there because it was off limits. Harry pressed his thumb against his scar one last time, gathering his wits to stand. As he stepped toward the entrance, he heard the hearth flare up behind him.

The Gryffindor whisked out his wand, aiming at the bottle green flames leaping in the fireplace. The training wizard hadn't known the sitting room hearth was connected to the Floo network; Spiridon's was the only Floo-linked fireplace he knew of in this house. He hoped the manor wasn't under Ministry supervision, or he was sure to get expelled for magic use in a few moments. It seemed quite unnatural for the Floo to remain so green without someone coming forth, but finally, an unwieldy form stumbled out. The fire returned to its natural red-orange as the stranger panted, hunched over before the table.

Harry only noticed the person wore dark robes that were tattered and sooty, and smelled faintly of an unidentified odor. Before he could interrogate him or her, Ron rushed into the room, staring at the outsider. His wand was focused on them in a second. "What!" Against his better judgment, Harry took one step closer. "Harry."

Harry studied the unfamiliar person, coming to the conclusion that the Smythes must have known them to allow them Floo entry, but he held his wand steady. Scanning the wheezing figure a bit closely, Harry was startled to note the signature red hair. Gingerly, the male visitor stood straight, his trembling hands smoothing over his threadbare robes.

Percy seemed detached, and his face was colorless. Nevertheless, he looked as if he'd simply arrived through the wrong grate for a tea engagement.

"Percy." Harry heard the underlying tone of reservation in Ron's speech. "You're a bit late for the feast." They slowly put their wands away. Percy's quavering hands adjusted the crooked hat set on his disheveled hair. He seemed quite disoriented, and his baffled eyes roosted between the boys at the mention of dinner. As Harry observed the most unpopular Weasley son, he noted the junior undersecretary mimicked his old superior, Barty Crouch, Sr., whom Harry remembered from fourth year. Their movements were peculiarly similar.

His vacillating lips parted, and Harry could still hear the harsh breaths. "F-Feast, yes," he nodded to himself with wide eyes. "We—dinner, y-yes."

"Where've you been?"

Percy remained inexplicably aloof. "Ministry."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "All day?" Percy subconsciously smoothed his robes.

"Lots to do," he waveringly stated, his tone a mockery of confidence. "Much to do for elections and campaigning...must work...had to—had to work." His eyes leapt over the room. "Penny and I—Penny and I are late?"

Ron's pitch was suspicious. "Yes." The strictest Weasley's eyes watered somewhat. He flexed his right hand and his lip quivered.

"Terribly sorry, we—I was held up, campaigning, you know," he mindlessly rambled. "Penny wanted to wait, but she didn't have

to...Penny stayed all day, missed her mother's cobbler. Isn't that right, Penny?" He glanced to his right. Harry's brows tangled in his fringe as he and Ron shared a look. He hoped the Ministry strain hadn't gotten to Percy this quickly.

"Are you all right, Percy?" The untidy haired wizard inquired. The alumnus shuddered, mopping his ashen brow with a dusty hand. Ron sniffed at the odor and cringed.

"So sorry," he murmured, staring beyond the room. "Penny here wanted to come, right Penelope?" Harry vaguely remembered that name; hadn't she been Percy's girlfriend in Hogwarts? Again, he looked to his right side, evidently seeing something the current Gryffindors could not. "You so wanted to see this country, didn't you?"

"You're freaking me out, Perce," Ron nervously chuckled. Harry merely swallowed the dryness in his throat. Percy clutched at his robes, his moist eyes darting about the area.

"Ron, you remember Penny?" He looked up and squinted distractedly. "And Harry's here too, good show." Harry was completely befuddled and alarmed. Percy's trembling was more visible. "She always told me..." he paused, drawing his brows in ambiguity. His eyes, it seemed, were becoming more focused. "She wanted me to believe you, Harry. Side with Dumbledore rather—rather than with F-Fudge."

It seemed Ron could take no more of this nonsense, and he clenched his fists and strode over to his brother, partially blocking him from view. Harry vaguely wondered where Hermione had run off. The adult wizard flinched slightly as Ron pat his shoulder. Again, Percy's eyes grew wooly. "N-No, I know nothing . . . ." Ron turned to give Harry a look.

"Perce," his eyes scanned the wizard's robes. "Your robes are all ripped to shreds. What happened?" Percy fumbled to take off his pointy hat, placing it between his fingers. His hands trembled too much to set the hat back on his head properly, and it fell.

"Penny," he whispered, squeezing his hands together. It was as he turned to stare at the fire, that Harry saw the Ministry worker's first violent recoil. He jumped away with a grimace, backing into the table.

"Penny." He spoke her name with such anguish. Harry moved closer, watching as Ron spun Percy around to face him, bringing his attention away from the fire.

"Yes, Penny," he played along, shrugging to his best friend. "Penny's fine." Percy straightened, clearing his throat with erratic movements. Staring at the boy's shabby cloak, the tall sixth year scrunched his nose, exhaling sharply at the smell, and lightly dusting off his older brother's robes.

"Yeah, what is this Percy?" he inquired, wiping the grayish, harder than ash powder. Wiping his hand vigorously against his trousers, Ron continued carefully brushing off the soot. "It's a bit much for Floo powder."

The redheaded court scribe stared at his robes, trailing a hand over his shoulder. He looked at the residue questioningly. Harry observed in silence, wondering how damaged Percy was to fail at answering a simple question. Percy stared down the front of his robes, mouthing something to himself, letting his hand drag through his hair slowly. When his hand hitched through his mess of hair, the wizard tugged forcefully, tugging out handfuls of hair in the process. "Stop." Ron weakly ordered. When Percy failed to listen, Ron grabbed onto his robes. "Stop it, Percy."

But it appeared Percy had found what he wanted. His cheeks were pasty as he held the portion of gray-white fragment higher to observe. "Percy," Harry finally found his voice, hoarse though it may be. "What is that?"

Percy hadn't seemed to hear him as he stared at the object longingly. His eyes were glassy as he dusted the gray soil off in vain, and he sadly held the piece closely to his chest to observe. Harry and Ron blanched when they heard his firm, quiet response.

"Penny."

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A/N: Revised chapter. The song is a substitute for the Sorting Hat song I adamantly refused to write. I had enough trouble getting words to rhyme in this one. This is the only song I'll ever write in this

story. I've no desire to do that again. As always, Review Responses are on the site.

A/N 2: Join the Yahoo Group for a bonus scene from this chapter, Confessions.

Chapter Twenty-Two Clues:

- 1). Percy's story.
- 2). The truth comes out.
- 3). Character death.

## Chapter Twenty-Two: Dust Thou Art

Harry stared out of the window, watching the hues of midnight compete to overlie one another. It was quite boring. But he found it better than trying to force himself to sleep.

It was true his head no longer throbbed with the feeling of Voldemort's content, but the headache was just beginning. Although, that was not the only reason slumber eluded him.

As of now, Themys Pallakis was swarming with Order members. Downstairs, he could hear their chatter, hear their noisy cracks from Apparation, and the Floo flared so much; he could now time the intervals between entrances and exits. From the clear racket, he even singled out who else had shown up.

He heard the clunking of Mad-Eye's clawed foot, abrading across the tile; Tonks had knocked over quite a number of things in the last two hours if her constant apologies meant anything; the rumbling voice of Shackbolt could be heard just down the hall. He thought he heard Bill or Charlie, but he knew they were too busy to come upstairs.

Order members ran up and down the staircase, across the halls, and Harry insisted that he'd heard footsteps above him. Hedwig flapped over to toddle across the duvet, hooting in concern. Grazing his nails across her front, Harry continued to stare.

"It's my fault, Hedwig." He muttered into the darkness. He felt a comfortable pinch on his finger. "She's dead because of me, you know?" He felt the feathers ruffle against his fingers in indignation. "Just because I'm still alive." The Gryffindor could only imagine the dark, contradictory look the owl's amber eyes would bore into him, but for now, he was only glad for the darkness. "Just ... all my fault."

Yes, he would remember tonight. Not only because of the blame he laid on himself, but also for the trust he had broken. In his friends, the Weasleys, the Order . . . . Tonight, it all came crashing down.

After Percy's arrival and admission, Hermione and Sirius stormed in, with a worried Mrs. Weasley in tow. But at the sight of her distraught child, Mrs. Weasley left Harry to Sirius and embraced Percy and his loyalty once more. Ron and Harry explained everything to Sirius and

Remus, and afterwards, the rest was a blur. Harry only remembered Order members spilling in from all sides not ten minutes later.

Spiridon had summoned Daedelus and Eomel to gently question Percy to see what exactly had happened. It was at that time Arthur appeared, clinging to his teary-eyed wife, while the Celestials prodded the wizard for information. But Harry couldn't even get the undersecretary's age; they were hurriedly ushered out by Remus and sent away.

The Gryffindor only gleaned bits of information from Tonks and Sirius hours ago; both foolishly believed him to be asleep and stood right outside of his door exchanging information. From what he could garner, Percy was covered in Penelope. In her ashes, to be exact. From Sirius's murmurings, Percy and Penelope were ambushed near the booth entrance and tortured by the exiled monarch and his minions.

Apparently, Mystikos wanted information Percy did not have, and killed Penelope out of dissatisfaction. What really stung Harry was Tonks' disclosure; she had seen Penelope earlier that night, before the Auror went back to Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Penelope was quite excited: Percy had proposed. They were on their way to the manor with their announcement when they were assailed.

And Harry ... Harry knew that he had just destroyed the lives of two people. What's worse, two families. The sixth year just wouldn't accept this wasn't his fault. So Harry continued to pet his owl soberly and gazed into the darkness.

It could not have been five minutes later; he noticed the muted conversations from the lower floor had become more distinct. In place of the dull roar of voices, he could hear words and snippets of conversation. With a rough swallow, he specifically perceived the mellifluous tone of the potions master. He sincerely hoped his private tutor hadn't caught on to the man's tone. There was no telling how the Being would react.

As Hedwig squawked, he noticed the darkness in his room receded rapidly. A tentative knock was heard before a flame-red head of hair came into view. Narrowing his eyes in the darkness, Ron sought out his fellow Gryffindor, hunched in his four-poster. "Harry? You awake there, mate?" Harry didn't answer quickly, but turned to the lanky

prefect. He noticed the dimly highlighted face of Ron swallowed nervously. "We can't sleep with all this racket, and I thought — "

"Come in." His faint voice instructed. Ron did not hesitate to trundle into the taut atmosphere of the guest room, anxiously followed by his fellow prefect and sister. Ginny closed the door behind them as Ron claimed the desk chair and Hermione favored the bed. Ginny dropped beside her. Harry didn't break his gaze from the thin sky and his fingers methodically smoothed the roosting owl.

For a while, the four merely sat in silence, keeping their gaze on assorted objects around the room. Harry thought this was both a relief and a disappointment at the same time. He was glad for the silence, as they all wordlessly agreed to need it, but he grew upset with it at the same time.

Another person was dead. Shouldn't they have rounded on him with blame and accusations? Were they holding back from Cedric to wait for a moment just like this? To relieve their anger all at once? Harry was bursting with anticipation. From what, he hadn't a clue. He only hoped he would manage to control his Elemental outbursts, before they caused commotion.

Ginny sighed deeply, burying her face in her hands. "When will this all end?" Her muffled voice questioned. Neither Ron nor Hermione answered, instead choosing to resume their fruitless staring. Harry brushed away a loose feather from Hedwig's plumage. His eyes stinging, the words tumbled from his mouth before he even realized he was speaking.

"When he's killed." He monotonously answered. When Ginny looked in his direction, he noticed her ruffled temple.

"But when will he be killed?" Harry blinked, coming to a harrowing awareness.

"When I kill him."

The scheme drifted through his mind several times since he found out, but it wasn't brutally concrete until now. He had to kill Voldemort, didn't he? He had to get rid of him. Hermione and Ron reacted to his shrouded confession in puzzlement, and he did not need to look at his bright acquaintance to know Hermione was quite skeptical. "You



mean when Dumbledore kills him." She calmly corrected. Harry firmly narrowed his eyes at the window.

"No." His response was resolved. The three students looked at him awkwardly, but he avoided their looks. It was now or never. "When I kill him." He repeated with significance.

Hermione and Ron swapped bemused expressions before, "But..."

"No." Harry rigidly cut in. He couldn't avoid this any longer. Hedwig nipped his finger in support. Drawing a shaky breath, Harry tipped his chin downward. "I'm the one he wants." He spoke of the dark wizard. "I'm the one who caused all of this. I'm the one who has to end it."

He heard a disapproving huff from the intelligent witch. "Harry, be reasonable." She soothingly began. Hermione cautiously leaned over to pat his forearm. "Surely, Dumbledore—"

"Dumbledore has done enough." The spectacled teenager disrupted, his tone dripping with resentment. "It's up to me. Only me."

"Now you're talking nonsense." She opposed, crossing her arms. Heavily sighing, the Gryffindor paused his fingers' ministrations and finally mustered enough courage to regard his friends. Hermione's countenance signaled her impatience for a valid explanation; Ginny seemed drawn between both arguments, and Ron looked decidedly befuddled. He cursed himself inwardly for waiting so long to admit the truth. This did not seem like the appropriate time to confess anything. Even so, he carried on.

"Remember that prophecy? The one we went after in the Department of Mysteries?"

"Of course." Ron nodded, tightening his robe. Harry looked away.

"Voldemort had to be after it for a reason, right?" He didn't see Ron's flinch at the mention of the sorcerer's name.

"Right." Hermione urged. Harry drew a deep breath.

"Guess what? I'm the reason." Considerable silence met his declaration.

"What ... do you mean?" The Quidditch keeper inquired after the pregnant pause. "You're not making any sense, Harry." With a pained grimace, Harry felt his chest hollow out, as if everything had been gutted out of him. Burying his fingers in Hedwig's back, his eyes followed the distinct patterns on the bedspread.

"Hermione, Ron, there's something I've been meaning to tell you . . . ."

And he did: Harry did not try to stop the words from coming — not that his mouth would let him. Harry told them everything from why he faced Voldemort as a toddler, to the prophecy's very words. He drew some amusement from the grave situation when Hermione admonished him for wrecking Dumbledore's office in an unbridled fit of rage. Ron and Ginny furthered it by sniggering uncontrollably and expressing their envy.

He deliberately failed to mention he had attempted the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange. He truly did not feel up to hearing Hermione's tirade on responsibility and his sanity. The Gryffindor also didn't need the frightened looks that were sure to grace the Weasleys' faces; he had caused them enough grief already. Oddly, he didn't feel bad from keeping that scrap of information from them.

When it came to his delivery of the prophecy, all three students leaned in closely to catch every word. Harry abstained from mentioning Neville's drawn luck from almost having been the marked child, for the simple fact of stemming an argument. Had he revealed said tidbit of information, he could have heard the quarreling now:

"Neville? As in Neville Longbottom?" Ron would ridicule. "The same Neville Longbottom who believed Seamus when he said a face full of dragon spit would cure acne?" And Hermione and Ginny would rightly defend the edgy Gryffindor, leaving Harry to draw into himself and staunch his confessions. He wasn't sure he would be able to start again if he was interrupted now.

But upon hearing the foresight, the others effectively lost all color, realizing the deeper meaning of Trelawney's words. Hermione, as usual, was rather unconvinced about the prophecy, but took comfort in the fact that Dumbledore trusted it. She began vocally analyzing

what each statement could mean, causing Ron to issue a long-suffering sigh and grumble disapprovingly. As she alighted on the verse Harry dreaded, the adept seeker was quite reluctant to satisfy Hermione's inquiry of the 'powers the Dark Lord knows not'.

With deep misgiving, Harry informed them of his private Elemental lessons with the Celestial prefect, and why he had been gone in the evenings so often. He even used the desk plant behind Ron to offer a demonstration. Hermione's façade lit in enthusiasm, while Ginny complimented him. Ron said nothing.

"Why haven't you told us this before?" Hermione demanded after he'd finished sprouting more leaves on the flowering shrub. He assumed his anxiety subdued him from making more of a spectacle. The young wizard refrained from answering. "What does Dumbledore think about your abilities?" She exhorted, prodding him for a reply.

Harry shrugged, concentrating on the feel of his owl's feathers. "Nothing really." It wasn't exactly a lie, but it wasn't the truth. Hermione sized him up with her skeptical gaze, but she seemed to accept the answer.

Quietly afterward she accused, "You didn't trust us?" She genuinely sounded hurt. Beleaguered, Harry swung his legs off the side of the bed, moving to lean on the sill.

He heard Ron's unmistakable scoff and the slight creak as he leaned into the chair. "You told Kaltag — a virtual stranger, I might add — but you didn't trust us enough to tell us?" His hands tightened on the ridge. Harry pursed his lips, peering into the darkness to forestall his answer.

"That's it," Ron's incredulous tone reached his ears. "You didn't, did you?"

Staring at the long gravel path leading into the obscurity of the trees, Harry exhaled sharply. "I didn't want you to get hurt. Were you even at the Ministry, Ron?" He hedged. "Did you see what you three and the others went through just because you were associated with me?"

"Harry — "

"They were going to kill you," he went on, discounting the bushy-haired witch. "Just because you were with me, backing me up. They almost killed Sirius and the Order because they came to right my foul-up. This isn't some jumped-up rivalry we're dealing with, Ron." His voice thinned into despair. "This is our life. Your lives. If you know anything about me, or stand with me; you become a target. Look at what happened to my parents! Cedric!" Harry's wet palms gripped the ledge in enmity. "And Penelope! The latter barely even knew me! And they're all dead ... because of me. I killed them."

"Now, that's not true," he was surprised to hear Ginny reprove, her balled fists shaking with anger. "You did no such thing. You-Know-Who and that ruddy partner of his murdered them. They're to blame, not you." Harry closed his eyes.

"She's right," Hermione acknowledged. "And you know this, Harry. You had nothing to do with their deaths. Penelope and Cedric were just in the wrong places at the wrong times." Her logical tone came into earshot. Harry balled his fists and slammed them on the marble sill.

"Because of me," he emphasized. "Because Cedric stood by me, because Percy knows me, because my parents — "

"Because You-Know-Who is nutters," Ron disputed. "That's why." Ginny nodded and crossed her arms. Their faces dared him to disagree. Harry couldn't believe they were this naïve. How could they not see the fault rested squarely on his shoulders?

"My wand may not have fired the curse — "

"And your mind didn't think it and your mouth never spoke it, because it — wasn't — you," the mulish Muggleborn stressed. Hermione abruptly stood, causing Hedwig to flap to her cage crossly. "This is a war, Harry. People will die, and you can't always thwart their deaths. As long as you aren't the person behind the wand hurling Killing Curses, you're not accountable. None of this is your responsibility."

The dark-haired Gryffindor narrowed his eyes at the obscurity of night. "You can't possibly believe that. I know you don't." Hermione

closed, regarding the sixth year with concern. Harry's nails dug into the marble of the sill as his eyes hardened.

"But Hermione — "

"No, Harry," she forcefully stated. As his eyes narrowed in her direction, Harry noticed Hermione's lips thinned more than McGonagall's ever could. "You know I'm right." That was her last word. Harry knew he could not win an argument with Hermione; even starting one was futile. Could she have been right? Was everything just a big misunderstanding? But Harry knew, even if it wasn't his very wand that murdered them, he as good as killed his parents and everyone else anyway.

He would never admit this to his friends, for fear of their backlash. Sighing despairingly, he mutely conceded defeat. Hermione smiled with what seemed to be relief, and she sat down beside Ginny.

Harry slowly extracted his grip from the ledge and wiped his sticky hands on his robe. Offering the others a lopsided grin, Harry inched closer to his friends.

Ron fidgeted slightly in his chair and gave Harry a tense look. Throwing his best friend a questioning glance in response, Harry braced himself for Ron's retort about reliance. Instead, he raised his brows at Ron's request. "Er, can you do that plant thing again, mate?"

Blinking owlishly, Harry dumbly nodded. He waved his hand frivolously and observed the plant blossoming vibrant almond blooms. The expectant Gryffindors sighed in delight.

Ron released a coarse breath. "And this is supposed to help you defeat You-Know-Who? Are you going to potpourri him to death?" The ginger-haired keeper teased, smirking scruffily. Harry tendered a smile that did not quite reach his eyes, but he was still grateful. The prefect's brown eyes brightened and his brow pleated. "Just think, you can pass Herbology without breaking a sweat."

The dark glare Hermione gave both boys kept their mouths shut. "He wouldn't dare." Harry bristled at Hermione's bossy claim.

"Garn, Hermione, thanks for making the decision for me. Goodness knows I can't think for myself." He groused dryly, flopping onto the bed. Biting her lip, Hermione gave off an impression of regret.

"Lighten up, Harry." Bolstered Ginny. Harry lifted a brow at the chaser's defiance. "It's not as if men can think for themselves anyway." She flippantly crossed her arms and looked away, but Harry caught her grin.

"That'll cost you laps when we get back to the pitch." He threatened mockingly. Ginny shrugged, standing in mid-gesture and wished the others good night. When she opened the door, Harry, Ron and Hermione could still hear the Order members plotting at half volume from the lower floor.

ooooo

Harry woke up to a surprisingly empty manor on Boxing Day. The silence, he was quite used to after being here for nearly a week. There was just something heavy and dark about this type of silence. It was as if everyone was obviously silent for a reason. Harry knew they probably chose to do so for Percy's sake.

As he crossed the foyer toward the drawing room, he noted the lack of bustling wizards. Harry didn't remember Ron or Hermione leaving his room, or even when he fell asleep. The Order must have left some time in between. Did Sirius go with them? Rubbing his aching neck, Harry pushed open the door to the kitchen, spotting the two Weasleys and Hermione at the table.

Neither of his best friends appeared to have slept at all last night, if their drooping eyes and frazzled appearance served any indication. Ginny looked rather well off out of the three of them. "G'morning." Ron yawned, wiping at his eyes. He nestled his head on his overlapping arms.

Harry carefully poured himself a glass of citrus juice and snatched a few breakfast rolls and bacon strips off the tea wagon. "Where is everyone?" Hermione and Ginny budged opposite ways to make room for him as he dropped into a chair.

"Mum and dad have gone back," Ginny replied, listlessly stirring her tea. "The Order left, too. And I think Erastus has gone to market."

Harry took a healthy quaff from his glass and set it down. "Percy's upstairs sleeping." This made Harry's stomach drop a few stones. "Looks a right state. All swollen with a bruised eye and robes ripped to shreds." Ron raised his head a few inches with a dubious squint in Ginny's direction.

"How do you know that?" The chaser merely drew up her right shoulder and pushed her tea away.

"I went in his room this morning. Thought he might need a sister to ... you know, talk to." Was her quiet response. Ron glumly lowered his head back onto his arms. Harry forced his mouth to chew the scone, though he couldn't taste it anymore.

Hermione's cup clinked as she set it down with a sad look. "Poor Percy," she sympathized, shaking her head. "Why would they come after him? He hasn't a thing to do with Dumbledore or the Order."

"Information," Harry spoke softly, keeping his eyes on his breakfast. "They wanted information." The thick-haired witch sat up straight.

"Did you see it, Harry?" Hermione implored, her eyes intently regarding him. "Did you have a vision, a feeling, anything?" He quickly shook his head. Besides the pleased reaction from Voldemort, he felt nothing, he concluded. As the silence descended, the dining room door swung open to admit Starbuck, Nikola and Sirius. While the others expressed their acknowledgments, Starbuck murmured a quick good morning, grabbed a handful of scones, and rushed back out the door.

"Well, that was rude." Nikola insisted with forced brightness. "He's off to meet Circe." The Gryffindors tiredly nodded, and Harry pushed Sirius' nudging elbow from his ribs. The Entity sat behind the island, bromidic in inspecting the bacon and bits of leftover egg. "How's your brother holding up?" Ron gave a grunt in response while Ginny provided a brief report.

Sirius wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and leaned over the median. "Unfortunate chap." He responded after Ginny's account, his eyes cheerless. "He'll take this quite hard, he will."

"He's no stranger to loss." Ron vaguely muttered, burying his head deeper in his pillow of arms. Ginny shoved a spoonful of eggs in her mouth.

Humming thoughtfully to himself, the Animagus brushed a large hand over his coarse chin. "I should possibly visit Number Twelve today to see how they're coming along." Harry caught his godfather's musings and tilted his head to listen closely.

"What are you planning?" He cautiously inquired.

"Hmm?" Sirius distractedly waved him off and supplied, "Order business, Harry. Tonks and Kingsley should be at the ministry by now, garnering any tips they can. If we can find out anything suspicious, we'll know what Voldemort's plans are." Hermione primly nodded, joggling her leg.

"Torquay, yes, that's it." Nikola muttered to herself, staring out of the window.

"Remus is over there, but he can't do much for a few days," Sirius continued, scratching at the counter grout.

"Full moon?" Ginny queried. The wizard nodded.

"He's going to do a bit of investigating himself."

Harry furrowed his brows. "Isn't that quite dangerous? To go out and investigate in his state? What if he changes?" Sirius smirked and pat Harry on the back.

"He won't be going very far." He furtively winked at the younger wizard and walked to the breakfast cart once more. Harry knew what he meant: Remus would be on Olympus. He distantly wondered if the Smythe triplets knew of their real occupations. As he opened his mouth to further question the Order's business, the door abruptly slammed open and in strode a dark figure.

Harry suddenly noticed the kitchen was crowded with one too many people, the latest to enter being the most unwelcome. Sirius tensed, fingering his wand in his pocket as he regarded the sneering professor. At the table, Harry noted Ron and Hermione sat up a bit straighter and Nikola's attention diverted from her stool seat.



Ron had a nervous look on his face, openly wondering how the man found them and what his affair was. Staring down his hooked nose at the assembly of Gryffindors (and the lone Paraffin), Snape curled his lip in displeasure. "Of course," his silky tone drawled, "I would expect an absence of manners in a room occupied with Gryffindors." He hissed the house name with distaste.

The Weasleys stiffened and Hermione squared her shoulders. Harry made sure his wand was in reach; technically, they weren't on school grounds at the moment. Other than Hermione, no one would snitch, right? He could persuade Hermione not to inform Dumbledore of the truth of why his potions master had been jinxed rather severely . . . . "Snivellus." Sirius scrunched his face in aversion. "I was sure I smelled something quite foul roundabout."

"I fail to see how when your werewolf is nowhere in sight." Sirius went rigid and audibly growled.

"You've a lot of nerve setting foot in this place, Snivellus." Sirius sneered the moniker, advancing on the collected instructor.

Snape raised a brow. "Your small mind neglects to note that I am more welcome in this residence than you. Even the wizarding world accepts me."

This earned a snort from the Animagus as he drew closer. "Disturbed Death Eaters? I think not."

"You've not enough brain to think." The stony-faced professor affronted. "It's a pity Azkaban didn't devour the rest of your wits. You should have killed yourself when you had the chance; you hadn't a problem before, you as good as murdered your dreadful associates —"

"Why, you worthless tronk — !" Sirius and Snape lunged at each other, wands pointed at one another's throats. Hermione gave a noise of alarm and leapt from her chair, followed by the others. Harry's hand was on his wand, ready to hex Snape into the New Year when —

"Gentlemen." The intruding voice of Spiridon was soft, but firm. Neither wizard removed their wand. Sirius was breathing hard from

anger, as opposed to Snape who sustained poise. The general cockled his lips and favored an impatient look at each adult. "You're not setting an example for the children by dueling."

Harry knew Snape could care less about setting any example, and his dark eyes reflected as much. All the same, the two rivals lowered their wands, albeit grudgingly. Shifting his fuming gaze from the equally enraged wizard, Snape nodded churlishly at Spiridon. "Severus." He inclined his head in gracious reception.

Harry noted Spiridon did not come in alone; Kaltag guardedly stood beside his father, assessing Snape with a circumspect look. When Snape's bottomless orbs found the Being's, Harry watched Kaltag look away. Snape's lips tightened as if restraining himself. "Smythe." His clipped tone recognized.

"Sir." Came the hushed response. The elder Celestial appeared quite displeased with his indifference. Sirius brusquely moved out of the greasy-haired wizard's proximity and took a seat beside the wide-eyed Entity, far from Snape. Hermione gripped the back of her chair, but did not move to sit. Ron merely seethed at Snape's presence. Harry's anger did not abate, and he kept his wand in reach.

Spiridon frittered a few moments in absorbed stillness, before his face brightened. He peered fixedly at his oldest. "Kaltagonus, why don't you show Severus to my office?" Harry gauged the Being's reaction, figuring Spiridon wanted to kill two birds with one stone. But Kaltag wasn't having it. He crossed his arms and raised his shoulder in mutiny.

"Why?" he snappily countered. "He's obviously been here before. He should know the way." Harry could have sworn he heard a snort of approval from Sirius. Snape remained fairly motionless.

Spiridon thinned his eyes slightly in his son's direction, waving his hand at the potions master. "It would be good for you two to — "

"No, thank you." The prefect quickly interrupted. By now, everyone but Harry, Snape and Sirius sported a mask of perplexity. Eyeing Snape, Harry observed the wizard's inscrutable look. Spiridon maintained his slight smile and did not back off.

"I insist, Kaltagonus — "

"And I insist you drop it. I — said — no." The student decisively informed. Kaltag propped himself heatedly against the doorjamb and stared at the cabinets. Harry spotted Spiridon's bright smile dissolving into a withering frown.

"Young man, I do not know what has gotten into you of late." He sharply reproved, reducing his eyes into daunting slits. "I highly doubt — "

Again, the young Being cut his father's sermon short. "Yes, you highly doubt a lot of things, father. Doesn't necessarily mean you are right." Nikola stifled a quail and looked away; Harry exchanged a worried glance with Ron. They turned just in time to see the Celestial's nostrils broaden and his scowl evolve into a full-scale glare.

"Kaltagonus Lu — "

"Not in front of the guests, father." The boy prolonged in reproach through clenched teeth. His eyes stared dead ahead, gleaming an insubordinate tangerine at the refrigerator. As Spiridon opened his mouth to undoubtedly deal chastisement, Snape saved the Celestial student from further disgrace.

"I will leave you to your squabbling. I am quite sure I can direct myself to your office, Smythe." Snape slanted his head respectfully to the incensed businessman. Throwing a parting glare in Sirius' direction, Snape moved for the door. Spiridon stiffly stepped aside to let the wizard pass. Harry caught a glimpse of Snape's billowing robe before the door swayed shut, noting Kaltag did not once look in the haughty instructor's direction. Moving his hand from his wand, the young wizard breathed a sigh of dismay, taking his seat again.

Before Spiridon could open his mouth once more to deliver reprimand, the firstborn moved for the breakfast tray, swiping a scone. "Who was that hideous frog — ?"

"Kaltagonus." His father settled for a warning scold. Hermione found her seat and sat with an ashen complexion. The Aripedes prefect huffed in annoyance, rolling his eyes.

"I meant, who was that thoroughly unpleasant woman calling herself Fudge's senior undersecretary?" Harry livened up at this, giving the standing Beings a devious stare.

"Hang on," Ron's airy tone broke in. "Umbridge still works there?"

"Apparently."

Harry twisted his mouth to the side. "You were at the Ministry?"

"Meeting with the minister." Spiridon notified, removing his outer cloak; he continued to give his son a black look. Kaltag made a noise of exasperation as he munched and ingested.

"And who doesn't, nowadays?" He persisted, mussing his hair untidily. "That shifty-eyed assistant of his told us we had to wait because he had a great number of meetings today. So we sat in reception for over three hours, only to be shuffled in and shuffled out of Um-birch's office — "

"Umbridge," Ginny corrected with amusement.

" — And told Fudge wasn't seeing anyone or commenting on anything. That took two minutes! What a bloody waste of morning!"

"Kaltagonus." Spiridon rebuked him on his uncouthness. Ginny tittered at the Celestial's exasperation as he stuffed his mouth with honey biscuits.

"And to top it off, she was rude about it! I mean, how dare she!"

"That's Umbridge, all right." Harry dryly put in, taking a sip of his drink.

Kaltag settled himself on a stool, weighing his head in his hands with a smirk. "Well, the upside of it all was when I clopped my tongue, she shot out of her seat and cried in a right panic: She was yelling something about beasts. Wonder what that was all about."

Hermione had a self-satisfied look about her while the other Gryffindors chuckled. Evidently, the puffed-up undersecretary still feared the centaurs. Immediately, the battalion leader rounded on

his wound up son. "What have I told you about clucking your tongue in the presence of chiefs of state and cabinet members?"

The young prefect bitterly focused on his hands and dismissively mentioned, "Don't forget Snape is waiting on you." Spiridon made a noise of reminiscence and collected his cloak up. Nodding to the room in general, he pushed past the door and clicked away. A few seconds later, the unusually quiet Sirius stood with an air of resolve, following Spiridon's trail. He turned to the lounging students and offered a tight smile.

"It's best if I be on my way, now," he fiddled with the well-worn cuffs of his robe. "I'll be back before tea." With that, Sirius entered the drawing room and walked toward the sitting area.

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The rest of the holidays came and went uneventfully. Save for a handful of the house team Sliatyckx players dropping by for a meeting, the holiday was void of any other guests. Sirius spent the New Year in Greece, and remained at Grimmauld Place for the rest of the break. Percy departed from Smythe Manor, and Harry was quite relieved to not have encountered him at all.

As Harry flipped the final latch on his trunk, he paused to take in his surroundings. With a slight pang, he realized he would miss his room. The guest room was a far cry from the raucous dorm he shared with eleven other boys. It seemed Hedwig readily agreed with him: He had a difficult time getting the snug owl back in her coop. Giving his quiet room one last look, Harry drew the hangings and dragged his trunk out.

The ride back to the mosaic was without incident, as was the travel to the Rippling Point and King's Cross. Harry still hadn't become used to this form of travel, and was slightly pleased to know the others hadn't either.

Riding back to Hogwarts was unusually quiet. He shared a compartment with Ron and Hermione, since the Smythes took one of their own and Ginny decided to bury herself in Luna's odd theories and Neville's new plant books.

The most that had ever come out of the boring trip back was Ron's struggle with a rebellious Chocolate Frog. Harry chuckled as the confection scaled the keeper's face to get away, but Ron captured it quickly. Hermione didn't look at all pleased when he wiped the chocolate smudges off his face with the back of his sleeve.

Harry sat undisturbed for a solid hour after Hermione hauled a disinclined Ron through the corridor for rounds. Hermione returned in a fury, brandishing the Prophet in her fist and contending that Fudge hadn't made a comment about Percy's attack ("Why, that no-good git!"). Since they failed to get the Daily Prophet in Greece, they'd been in the dark about the goings on of the wizarding world. She also went on to read the paper, and muttered something about the slight increase of suspicious Death Eater activity occurring.

The ride from Hogsmeade station to the castle was an undisturbed one. The walk back to Gryffindor tower seemed to be even more silent. Harry dimly wondered why things seemed to be so quiet and tedious among them. The rest of the school seemed undaunted and prattled away about their holidays. Harry hadn't even noticed when he entered the Sixth Year Boys' dormitory.

The rest of the evening was spent sharing the highlights of their time off (leaving out the most important details) and finishing up their essays. For Harry, that time was used to conclude his Charms and Potions essay, as well as choose a focus for the next Defense Association meeting. Ron was busy writing in uncharacteristic larger letters as he finished his essay for Potions. Hermione frowned deeply, heading up to the girls' dormitories shortly thereafter. After waiting for the ink to dry on their essays, both Ron and Harry turned in an hour later.

ooooo

Cornelius Oswald Fudge was a proud man. There could be no wizard prouder than he. With the purest of pureblood ancestry, a vast number of Galleons in his Gringotts account, and a world of wizards under his reign: there weren't any wizards to compare. He was the most powerful man in the history of wizarding English political affairs. And he had quite a useful title to his advantage: Minister for Magic.

He carefully looped his signature on the bottom of the analysis from Madam Bones, massaging his tender hand before pulling out his wand. Tapping it lightly, the parchment contorted itself until it was smaller, creased, and zoomed out of the thin, open transom atop the entry. Sighing sharply into the quiet air of his dark office, he pulled another form from the lessening stack before him, not bothering to read its lackluster words.

It had been a mainstream day for Cornelius Fudge. His day began quite early, as usual, when he met with an unsavory fellow from Gravesend, requesting the presence of Aurors and Obliviators at the town square for their annual Turning of the Year carnival. Apparently, revelers became quite unruly after the drink and sought out unwilling Muggles to make merry with. After refusing to acquiesce with the wizard's outrageous demand for the ten finest Aurors of the Ministry, Fudge met with a repulsively outspoken American diplomat.

Following a bout of dreadful conversation, the minister ended the session early to escape the attaché's ravings on the state of the British Ministry. As he slapped his eyes with his handkerchief, Minister Fudge found all the things that were said about Americans to be unflatteringly true.

When he first set foot in the ministry atrium, he was bombarded with the planned schedule for the day from his unsightly new aide. He had yet to learn her name, and he could care less for what's-her-face. It would only be a matter of time before he sacked her and appointed another. He sincerely hoped the next aide at least knew how to make a cup of tea; he could only drink hot flavored water so much.

Before he even hung his day cloak on its trusty hook, his office Floo flared, and the familiar head of his ghostly pale second son, Vivien, bobbed in the green-flamed earth. His heated expression could only mean he had recently argued with his older brother.

Talking some sense into his youngest took a thankfully short time before the young wizard's head disappeared and Fudge settled into his wingback. If the four tall stacks of parchment served any notice, he knew he was in for a flat day. It wasn't until he lifted his quill and dipped it into the black ink that his Floo flared once more. He sighed as he regarded his bony-faced wife. He was starting to rethink giving his family access to his Floo Network.

His monotonous day consisted of canceling tonight's engagement with his wife (he wasn't particularly thrilled to watch the ice fairies perform for the fortieth time this year), maintaining a short Floo interview with the Daily Prophet, and clearing his afternoon schedule for his meeting with the minister for magic of France.

A tense courier named Avery conveyed another set of reports and exited, looking quite dead on his feet. He honestly did not understand why any of the reports went through to him; their decisions were already made before he even received the reports. Minister Fudge hastily sifted through the stack of exploratory reports (complaints of poisonous quills and exploding inkwells in a Muggle gift shop on York Road) before setting them in the bottom drawer and closing it with a snap.

Minister Fudge also obtained a verbal account from one of the Aurors (Williamson, was it? He wasn't sure) regarding Azkaban inmate Wilby. Wilby, while not a Death Eater, evidently committed a heinous crime the wizarding world was demanding fair dealing for. "Killed a right four Muggles," the unfamiliar Auror reported, "and claimed a ghost told him to do it . . . ."

Some time later, that insufferable assistant walked in after her infernal rapping at the door, delivering a glass vase of blooming daffodils. Her mumbled explanation stated something about it being a gift from the former minister of magic: A gift of good luck for his hopeful re-election. He set it on the edge of his desk with a harrumph and went back to work.

He had hoped for peace too soon when the doors to his office flew open and a crazed wizard shouted and hollered incoherent words at him. Luckily, a few Aurors had already restrained the scraggly wizard "acting on behalf of all creatures magical".

Fudge scowled, and felt his face heat up as the Aurors dragged the lunatic away. The man continued to rant about creature rights and unfair regulations and proceeded to throw a small sack of some powdery substance, which landed right on the minister's hand. Fudge proceeded to wipe the grainy substance from his flesh and shouted after the aide, "See to it that I do not have any more disturbances, or I'll have your job!"



At present, the minister had just finished scrawling the 'd' in his last name before his desk mirror swirled. A round olive face, tinged with edginess came into focus. "Minister Fudge?" the small voice inquired. Fudge scowled.

"What?" he snapped, his quill blotting entirely too much ink on the letter 'g'. The young witch visibly trembled, speaking quickly.

"Your half eleven is here. Lucius Malfoy?" The minister rubbed the end hairs of his quill and nodded with a glare.

"Send him in. I expect tea in two minutes for the both of us. Get it right this time." He snarled, retaking his wand and tapping the parchment. It folded up and zoomed away as the knob to his door turned. When the entryway widened the shock of a blonde mane and a chiseled, icy face came into view. Wearing his signature black cloak, Lucius looked rather like an angel of death than the prominent, wealthy wizard he truly was.

The flaxen-haired wizard tipped his head slightly as the minister stood. "Minister Fudge." He acknowledged with a minor raise of his cane. Cornelius extended his hand.

"Good to see you again, Lucius." Malfoy's gloved hand gripped the minister for magic's tightly before Fudge moved to take his seat. "I must admit Lucius, I didn't think you'd come. What with that embarrassing Azkaban situation and all..." The elder Malfoy lifted his chin slightly.

"Yes, minister."

"It was all just a big misunderstanding, eh? Wrong place at the wrong time." Fudge continued to ramble with a keen smile.

"Imperius Curses are powerful things, minister."

Fudge, with a dismissive gesture, moved to stand before the fireless hearth. "Oh, with the formalities, Lucius. We are old friends." He spoke the words as if trying to make both wizards understand. Lucius' cane thumped against the carpet.

"My apologies, Cornelius." The door opened much too abruptly for either wizards' tastes, and Fudge was further displeased to observe

his assistant, carefully carrying their silver tray of tea. She hesitated when spotting the desk cluttered of parchment and moved to set it at the side table, rattling the china as she stumbled across.

Two pairs of piercing eyes flooded in contempt followed the witch as she placed the tray down and nodded curtly to both wizards before escaping their fixed stares. The minister had the good urge to tell her to never set foot in his office again, but he remained silent for the sake of his guest. The elder wizard turned from the door and stared at his collection of quills. "I sincerely want to apologize for your humiliation Lucius, and hope that you truly do not think you are in ill standing with the ministry?" His lip curled at the words.

Malfoy inclined his head stiffly. "Why, it never crossed my mind." Fudge stretched his lips into a sympathetic grin.

"This could have all been avoided if it weren't for Potter's..." Fudge seemed to think inwardly to himself for a while, his smile straining before he stared at Malfoy's raised brow. "How do you say ... Potter's verbal diarrhea?" The refined wizard straightened his cane with a smirk.

"Yes," he drawled, tracing his thumb over the serpent end. "Unpleasant little boy, isn't he? My son returns every summer and holiday with fresh grievances about how nasty Mr. Potter is."

The minister nodded absently. "Oh, yes. How's that son of yours? Driscoll, is it?" Lucius produced a civil smirk.

"Draco." Fudge sucked in a breath of disappointment, offering a grin of regret.

"Ah, yes. My apologies." Stepping slowly over his treading path, Fudge studied the carpet. "Potter." He spat in disdain.

Minister Fudge drew a breath of disgust, staring angrily at the urn of daffodils. "Potter thinks he can get away with anything, as long as he is under the protection of the school. Flouting centuries' old ministry regulations, disrespecting authority." He sneered in a patronizing voice. Fudge turned an agitated expression to Mr. Malfoy. "If it were up to me, I'd have had the boy expelled by now."

This caused the elder Malfoy to lift his brow. "And why is he not?"

"Why else?" Fudge countered with a shrill tone. "Dumbledore!"

Both wizards snarled at the headmaster's mention. Fudge began to pace before his hearth, pausing to eye the cloud of smoke above the teacups. "I am the Minister of Magic, but it's him people bend backwards for." He gestured to the formal chairs in the tea area before the grate. Lucius primly stood and took the offered seat; Fudge continued to pace.

Malfoy brought the teacup to his nostrils and inhaled the smoke, curling his rim back in revolt. Silver eyes pierced the minister's boldly as he reached into his inner robes. Fudge's brow creased as Malfoy elicited a hip flask. "Forgive me, Cornelius, but I do rather my tea with some spirit." Lucius leered with the hip flask in hand.

Fudge signaled flippantly. "By all means." He turned away squinting to look at a photograph of him standing proudly beside a famous tomb in Grimsby. "At least one of us should enjoy the day." He heard the faint clinking of china behind him and the cap being screwed back on the flask.

"If I may be at all frank, Minister..." Lucius began raising the tea to his lips. Fudge turned quickly with drawn brows.

"Oh, by all means."

Malfoy sipped from his wafting cup and made a slight face before setting it down quickly. "Dumbledore may be the one with the bite, but it's Potter that's barking." The elder wizard slowly nodded his agreement. "Silence him, and you will rule wizardkind once more."

The minister's eyelids crinkled at their corners when he squinted. But ... wasn't he doing that all along? He controlled the Daily Prophet all last year to keep Potter's mouth shut. Only it served to make his voice louder. Cornelius started, shuffling to take his seat athwart Malfoy. "You've seen the boy, Lucius, he does not know the concept of silence." He sat his cup of tea in his lap.

"Then you must teach him," Malfoy insisted, staring at the brew expectantly. "Where Dumbledore refuses to employ chastisement, you must stand proxy and teach the boy a lesson." Fudge sneered in a pleased manner, nodding to himself.

"Yes, he does need to realize he is keeping the Ministry from tackling this," he motioned foolishly, "Dark — Thingy." He grumbled with aversion. "And these Beings and Entities beasts. They also need to be dealt with." The minister's expression soured as he spoke of the Celestials.

"Quite." The heeding wizard agreed. "One can only have so many thorns in their side."

"Indeed." Fudge took a healthy quaff of his scalding tea before pulling a face and setting it down to exclaim. "Ah! I am quite sure the assistant has outdone herself. I am sorry for this awful tea. Never the right temperature, barely any taste; she has it in for me, I'm sure." His mouth tingled and numbed slightly with the bitter after taste.

The head of the Malfoy household smirked, clasping his cane in his fists. "I must be on my way, Cornelius. I am rather confident you have other engagements to grace with your presence." Both wizards stood and grasped one another's hands. "I do wish you the best of luck on your campaign."

"It is appreciated," Fudge replied with a barren chuckle. "Do say hello to the wife for me." Lucius inclined his head and sauntered toward the doors, exiting as quietly as he entered. The minister turned to frown at the steaming mugs of tea and their kettle before waving his wand to banish it from his sight. His mouth still tingled and felt deadened from the burning liquid.

Grumbling as a few messages fluttered in from the transom, Fudge retook his prominent seat behind his desk. Stupid assistant.

And so it went, the minister continued his duties, his meetings, his obligations, feeling less like himself with each appointment. The adamant liberal from Brazil, representing their Ministry, refused negotiations on cauldron structure. He received a sanctioning Floo from the shifty-eyed Italian minister, confirming his visit to Italy later today. The aged minister responded to Floo after Floo from media publications to Umbridge's daily report. Funny, he hadn't heard from Weasley of late. The boy was usually the first to attack him with meaningless reports before the workday began.

Hours passed, and Fudge stoked the fire behind him after his seventh set of tea for the day. He thought by now he'd soak well through his robes from the amount of boiling, tasteless tea he consumed, but found it to be quite cold. With an angry sigh, he massaged his throbbing hand once more and set his quill to finish signing. The wizard squinted at the blurry squiggle that was his signature, and he wondered how long he had been here. He should be leaving for Italy fairly soon. It would not do to be in terrible shape for an official meeting.

His last meeting with a vizier from Uzbekistan had him squinting his eyes and poking his ears. He could barely hear a word the advisor was saying, and it certainly did not help that Fudge himself had given up paying attention. Add to that the consultant's soft voice and thick accent, and he would have had better luck understanding Gobbledygook.

Minister Fudge had given up reading a document from Shackbolt on the Black assignment, and he set aside the statement for later. Collecting his cloak, he huffed with effort and rubbed at his hazy orbs. His first task when he was re-elected minister was to assign himself a vacation. Agatha would indubitably enjoy a retreat. His heart thumped wildly at the thought of his wife, how disappointed she would be that he would not make the performance tonight. She would understand: He had business.

Minister Fudge proudly donned his pinstriped cloak, and lime green bowler hat, pointing his nose in the air as he strolled to the fireplace. His mouth prickled with the acrid flavor of his last cup of tea. Dim-witted assistant.

Fudge took one last look at the urn of daffodils on his desk, and narrowed his eyes. He hadn't remembered them being quite so vivid. Taking a pinch of Floo powder from the tin on the bare mantel, Minister Fudge tossed it in and swayed as the emerald flames sprang to life.

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Harry had forgotten exactly how noisy the Great Hall was after holidays. And the lavatories. And the corridors. And the Gryffindors. Especially the Gryffindors.

The school had been abuzz all day about holidays. Students were scrambling to write the last sentence in their twenty-seven inch essays. Witches were swapping barrettes and periodicals and gossip. Hermione busily threatened points off of boisterous cliques all day, if her raw face served as any hint.

Regardless, the first two days passed smoothly, with the obvious exception of potions. Snape had paired them and critiqued the Gryffindors and Paraffins so much Harry's tongue was throbbing from biting down on it so hard. Of course, it didn't help that Malfoy was smirking over his shoulder at him the entire lesson.

The professors piled more homework and N.E.W.T. practices on them as soon as they entered the classrooms, and the castle air seemed to be tight with anticipation. Even the seventh years were quite anxious, and N.E.W.T.s were a good five months away. Harry heard several rumors of nervous breakdowns already beginning, and they hadn't even been back to school a week.

Now, it was a particularly exhausting Wednesday evening as the last members of the Defense Association trickled out of the Room of Requirement. The cushions were all arranged, and Harry had sent them off rather early, since he needed to finish a reading and answer long questions for tomorrow morning's Transfiguration class.

He sent Hermione and Ron off along with the rest of the members as he finished stacking the bookshelf and repaired the cracks and splits in the wall as best as he could. He would need to get Dobby sometime to fix them up better.

Pushing the burnt mannequin in the corner, Harry rubbed the sleep from his eyes and yawned. It had already been a taxing day, what with Lavender and Parvati still exploiting their time in the spotlight (the new rumors he heard about the prophecy were rather wild than last month's), and he, in turn, garnered more suspicious looks from his schoolmates. It was bad enough he thought he might be the Child of Phoenix, but to have everyone accusing him with their looks? Harry sighed again.

To top it off, he had Quidditch practice to look forward to tomorrow night, and an extra six inches on his next essay from Snape, since he failed to answer a question correctly. Of course, Jace had knocked it down from the additional fifteen inches Snape demanded

at first. Harry had the strong urge to ask Kaltag to get his godfather off of his case, but he didn't want to risk the wrath of the Being. He was already moody enough as it is.

The young wizard shut the door behind him and walked up the corridor. It was dark, but not too late, so he had enough time to get back to Gryffindor Tower without risking point deductions or detention. His feet dragged and seemed heavier than normal. Perhaps he was more tired than he realized. Nevertheless, no matter how exhausted he appeared, Hermione would no doubt nag him awake until his work was done. He really didn't need that right now.

As Harry entered the faintly lit sixth corridor, he wondered how Percy was faring. The last time he had seen him was Christmas evening. From word of mouth (mainly Ginny and Ron), he learned Percy was back at his flat in London. Mrs. Weasley apparently visited as often as she could, because the junior undersecretary refused to go to the Burrow. Harry's mind wandered to that night.

Dust. Ashes. Percy was covered in Penelope Clearwater's ashes. If Harry thought hard enough, he could almost see broken portions of bone all over his robes, too. His stomach twisted and Harry swallowed hard. He had done this. He had caused Penelope's death.

Voldemort sent them after Percy to get information. Information on him. It was his fault. Always his fault. His fingers caught on his necktie and he loosened it around his throat. No matter how much he tried to save them, he always wound up getting them killed in the end. His mother, his father Cedric, Penelope — who was next? Harry bitterly mused. It was only a matter of time until someone else —

Harry shivered in the intense cold that bathed right through him, icing his blood and bones over. His vision blurred slightly behind his glasses, but focused once more as warmth rapidly returned to his body. Harry rubbed his arms and turned to face the intruder with a glare.

His glare faltered as the ghost hovered a few feet away with a livid expression on his face. Harry's breath caught in his throat. He knew that face.

The ghost was mumbling angrily to himself. Harry couldn't believe it. Well, he had seen his fair share of ghosts. This was Hogwarts after all. But he could see right through him, straight through his translucent pinstriped cloak, his balled fists, and his washed out chartreuse bowler hat to the grainy wall behind him.

Suddenly, the furious expression turned on him. Harry's eyes widened. "Potter!" He hissed, narrowing his gleaming eyes menacingly. "Tell me: The headmaster's office is this way, boy?" He vaguely pointed in some obscure direction Harry didn't notice. He was too busy staring at that lime green bowler hat.

With one last look of disdain in the young wizard's direction, the ghost of Cornelius Fudge drifted down the corridor, disappearing through a nearby wall. Harry stared at the spot under the torch the minister had just soared through. His eyes were still quite wide and his mind was blank. Only one thought raced through his mind.

The Minister for Magic was dead.

Harry took off down the passageway and fled back to Gryffindor Tower.

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A/N: Revised chapter. R/R.

A/N 2: Giving credit where credit is due: Chapter title comes from the poem, A Psalm of Life (shorter title) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

A/N 3: Those of you who are particularly perceptive might have noticed I've changed the story's rating from K+ to T.

Chapter Twenty-Three Clues:

1. Reactions to the minister's death.
2. An upset.
3. A little romance, a little reminder.



## Chapter Twenty-Three: The Serpents of Blackest Night

Harry zipped through the dark corridors of Hogwarts until he skidded to a halt before the portrait of the Fat Lady. She stared down her pointed nose sharply at the panting Gryffindor. Gulping large mouthfuls of air, Harry shouted the password in a pant. "C-Carpe occasus." He spoke before she could question him. With suspicious eyes, the Fat Lady swung the portrait open and admitted him into the full common room.

The young wizard dashed through the hole and pushed past the eager Creeveys and spotted Hermione and Ron by the fire. "He's dead!" He breathlessly announced without hesitation. The noise level in the common room dropped considerably. His best friends both gave him a confused look. The sixth year ran a hand over his glossy face and gripped his dark hair to stop his hand from shaking. "I saw — I saw right through him with — with my own two eyes!" Harry unsteadily confessed.

Ron and Hermione stood from their book-laden couch and furrowed their brows. "No way!" Ron exclaimed. He paused with significance as Harry caught his breath. "Whom are we talking about?"

"Minister Fudge!" The common room burst into excited whispers and exclamations before quieting to glean more information.

"What?" Hermione asked in disbelief. Her eyes were a dark mix of uncertainty and astonishment. Harry sighed, pacing before the fire. Fudge was dead. Voldemort killed Fudge. It was his fault. Voldemort killed Fudge because of him.

"He's a ghost now! He's dead! As dead as Peeves!" This caused Hermione to frown.

"Technically, Peeves isn't really dead — "

"He was all see-through and he was floating — he was dead!" Ron opened his mouth to interrupt Harry, but instead shouted at the buzzing common room to get back to work and mind their own business.

Harry continued to ramble on about how dead the minister was and how his death was his fault.

"Now, Harry," Hermione began, fixing a stare at the nosy Gryffindors and Paraffins dotting the common room. "You don't want to cause a scene." She finished quietly. Harry clenched his fists and wondered why his heart was trying to break through his chest. Because this is the fifth person, Harry, something within him sharply accused. The fifth person you've killed. He barely heard Hermione's quiet rant.

"...Knew we should have stayed with you. Did you have a vision?" Blinking, Harry gathered his eyebrows.

"What? No, no, I didn't have a vision! I saw him as clear as I'm seeing you ... well, as clear as you can see a ghost." He blathered, staring at the carpet and striding back and forth.

"Are you sure he's dead?" Ron finally spoke. "I mean, maybe it's just Peeves or someone having a laugh."

"No, it's my fault."

"You're sure it's not a vision, Harry? Does your scar hurt?" The wizard groaned and squeezed his fists together.

"I'm not seeing things or having a vision and no, it's not a joke." He glared. He had to make them believe him. They won't believe you. Harry sharply sighed. Wracking his mind for a solution, he quickly grabbed Hermione's arm.

Startled, the witch struggled out of his grip. "Wha — ? Harry, what are you doing?"

"Hey!" Ron jumped in, separating the two. Harry glowered at them in expectation.

"He's in Dumbledore office right now! Come on, I'll show you." He reached for Hermione's arm again but only grasped air.

When he caught her eye, she regarded him with insecurity. "Harry, you can't go charging into Dumbledore's office now. If the minister is here, he is in a private meeting with the headmaster." She rationally explained with a weak smile. "Besides, if he is dead — "

"He is." Harry firmly declared in aggravation.

"We'll read about it in the Prophet tomorrow." She reached for a thick book atop the large pile and held it out. Her tone became serious and displeased. "What's more, it's late. You still have to write your Potions essay — "

In one swift motion, Harry snatched the book from her grasp and hurled it into the fire. Ron and Hermione both exclaimed as the fire flared to life and settled once more. The common room stilled as Harry's face contorted in rage.

Hermione stood shocked, staring with wide fearful eyes at the hearth. "What'd you go and do that for?" Demanded Ron, staring at Harry in fury. His face matched his bright hair as the prefect became livid. Hermione continued to gape at the flames slowly devouring her Potions book.

Harry's nostrils broadened and his face ached from its fuming scowl. His gaze bore directly into the staggered witch. "I don't care if I fail Potions tomorrow. The Minister of Magic is dead." He coldly punctuated. "Why his ghost is now floating around Hogwarts is more important than crushed scarab beetles."

The clever witch's eyes watered as she looked upon the fire. Slowly her eyes fell to the hearthrug. Harry's eyes narrowed further as Ron stepped into Harry's line of sight.

"Leave her alone." He menaced in a whisper.

The spectacled wizard tried to control his shaking fists. They're scared of you. Harry growled low in his throat. "The wizarding world could be taken over at this very moment by Voldemort, and you," he spat, his glasses fogging up in annoyance, "You're worrying about your assignments for tomorrow. Useless." He seethed.

Hermione's woeful eyes rose to his in pleading. "Harry, please." Her voice sounded broken, beseeching, and helpless. Hermione suddenly seemed a lot less the formidable witch he usually encountered.

Your fault.

Eyes widening, Harry turned away stumbling toward the fire and grabbing the ledge for support. It was his fault. Everything was his fault. The deaths. This war. This war was his fault.

Hermione sighed and shook her head. "Don't do this." Ron gave her look of questioning and incredulity, but she ignored him. "I know what you're doing." She whispered. Harry cringed slightly when he felt her hand on his shoulder. "Don't blame yourself for this."

He felt his heart trying to break through his chest again. Harry wanted to lash out and tell them he didn't need to be rescued, but found his throat closed. He couldn't hold anyone responsible but himself. It was his duty to keep people from dying, but still, they fell. He didn't like Fudge, but he never wanted the man dead. "You mustn't blame yourself for things that are out of your control."

Harry wanted to believe her, but it was his responsibility. No one was supposed to die. No one was ever supposed to die. "But — "

"What did I say?" Ron bellowed, glaring at the common room at large. "Get back to your own work or it'll be ten points from Parador!" The students quickly scrambled to get back to work. Ron scoffed in disbelief as he turned to Harry and Hermione. "Cor! The nerve of these prats."

Despite himself, Harry managed an awfully weak laugh. Some of the tower's occupants huffed in indignation, but the red-haired prefect took no notice of them. Hermione's brow wrinkled as she regarded the exhausted-looking Gryffindor. "Harry — "

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he rushed looking at his trainers. "I should have never thrown your book. It was completely savage of me to destroy it — "

"Bloody right, it was." Ron bristled, still displeased with his housemate. "Potions books cost a few Galleons. You could've at least tossed her History of Magic book."

"Ron." The witch admonished with a dark look. Harry struggled to keep his smile down as Ron crossed his arms and grumbled.

Frowning, Harry's shoulders fell. "I'm sorry, both of you. I ... " he swallowed a sigh, choosing to run his moist hands through his

tresses. "I cracked when I saw Fudge, and — and he spoke to me, and he was — goodness, he was dead — " Unexpectedly, Ron's brown eyes blackened in rage.

"That's no reason to go Myrtle on us and throw a right fit — !"

"I know, Ron," Harry felt his temper burst to life once more. "It's just — you two didn't believe me."

The ginger-haired boy's face fell into a scowl. "Well, when you come storming in here shouting "death, death"! You get that reaction from people."

The young wizard's orbs narrowed. "You're my friends. You're supposed to believe me no matter what. I guess I now see that you don't." He boiled.

"Harry — "

Ron's head tilted in disbelief. "Oh, we believe you, all right. When you're not going nutters."

"Ron — !"

The green-eyed student's brow lowered. "You think I'm crazy?" He inquired in a dangerously low tone.

"Hm, now that you mention it — "

"Five points from Parador!" Hermione barked. "And put those Extendable Ears away, Colin!"

Harry couldn't believe it. The common room groaned, and some muttered obscenities as they packed their things away and disappeared up the stairwell. Hermione's face matched Ron's hair as deep grooves blemished her forehead. Harry looked away. They thought he was crazy?

"Now, Ron and Harry," she began in a rebuking tone, "Let's discuss this sensibly..."

"So you think you'll get sensible conversation out of a barmy person?"

"Harry, we don't think you're barmy — "

"Oh, no, he's barmy, all right," Prefect Weasley casually continued. "Once he takes a bludger to the head, he'll be back to normal."

Harry's fists tightened. "Ron, you're not helping." Hermione scolded through gritted teeth. Harry bristled.

"So the truth finally comes out. My best friends think I've gone mental."

"No; you were always mental."

"Ron!"

Taking a hard step toward Ron, Harry saw red and snarled, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't toss you into that fire." Unfazed, Ron drew to his full height, and replied in an equally threatening tone.

"Because that is what You-Know-Who wants." Immediately, Harry's anger faltered. Something coiled within him at his best friend's words. Ron's gaze was sincere, and even Hermione didn't seem to have a reprimand for him. Was this ... true?

The brown-eyed wizard sagged. "Can't you see, Harry? It's not you who's to blame for all this. You-Know-Who is." Ron insisted with determination. "I bet my Cleansweep it's him putting those thoughts in your head, to make you look and act crazy. For goodness' sake, you're the Boy-Who-Lived." He accused with a startling glare. "You've beaten him before; why aren't you even trying now?"

"I..." Harry didn't have an answer. Was it because it was his fault he couldn't overpower Voldemort? Wasn't it he who had jeopardized his Occlumency lessons, even if they were with Snape? A lot of good that did him. But was it true? Was Harry not even trying to beat Voldemort, after everything the murderous wizard had done? Harry had never felt more lost.

He felt a warm hand on his shoulder, followed by Hermione's quiet voice. "Harry," she began softly, "We don't think you're crazy. Isn't that right, Ron?"

There was a deafening silence from behind him, the air rather empty without Ron's immediate response. A strained sigh was heard from the prefect as Hermione's hand turned stiff on his shoulder. "You're not barmy," the redhead's voice admitted, rather unimpressed, "when you realize you're not to blame."

It was Harry's turn to sigh. He stared at the charred book in the fire, glad that he hadn't caught their eyes. "It becomes my responsibility when someone dies."

"Why must you always think that?" The harshness in Hermione's voice startled him, her hand swinging off his shoulder. She huffed angrily, "I swear, Harry Potter...." Hermione glared, clenching her fists, not able to finish her sentence.

Ron crossed his arms and stared at the back of Harry's head. "What'll it take for us to knock some sense into you? I can go get that bludger right now if you want me to." Closing his eyes, Harry inhaled the warm air from the hearth. They were only trying to make him feel better. They were just trying to make him realize it wasn't his fault. But he knew better.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it. Ron and Hermione were already leaning expectantly over him. "Can we just finish our work? I don't want Snape to drain our points because of me." He calmly moved around the congested table and headed for the steps without catching the prefects' eyes.

"Harry — " Hermione uneasily began. Harry was halfway up the stairs leading to the boys' dormitory.

"I really need to do that essay, Hermione," he interrupted, pushing past a fourth year. "And you can borrow my book if you need it." Harry disappeared into the ascending darkness leaving his friends to stare worriedly after him.

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Harry hadn't spoken a word to Hermione or Ron since last night. They had finished their work in silence, though he felt the occasional pair of eyes linger on him from the two. More than once he wanted to tear out of the common room, away from their probing eyes, but

Harry remained seated. He felt oddly distant from his best friends since their disagreement, but managed to tender a few Galleons to Hermione (she adamantly refused, but he gave it to her regardless) for her book. Even then, he hadn't the nerve to look her in the eye.

Of course, Hermione and Ron's doubts were reduced when the headlines for the Prophet and the Herald confirmed Harry's madness: THE MINISTER FOR MAGIC — DEAD! The entire Great Hall was brimming with noise as the students and staff nattered on the minister's death. The headmaster even made a brief statement about the loss of the minister for magic, not that anyone was paying attention, of course. But Harry was mostly glad the hall focused on the minister's demise, rather than his wild behavior in the common room the previous night.

No, the students were too busy making their own assumptions about how the minister expired. Ginny even commented about the Daily Prophet encouraging the idea that Sirius Black might have infiltrated the Ministry and killed Fudge while his back was turned. According to both papers, many Ministry workers were interviewed, including Fudge's sobbing aide, and an autopsy had yet to determine the cause of death. As Harry walked to class, he had heard all kinds of crazy rumors as to how Fudge was killed.

"I heard he dueled with You-Know-Who," Ernie Macmillan from Hufflepuff asserted in Double Astronomy. "You-Know-Who came looking for him to give up Wizarding Britain and Fudge refused."

As they transfigured pitchers into parasols, Harry overheard Terry Boot murmuring to Hermione and an Entity. "He was killed by a beast, I was told," he mumbled over his brittle handle. "Mauled beyond recognition."

Seamus was busily chatting during their group inquiry in Defense, "Heard Sirius Black killed 'im. Came back to finish the job."

What mostly surprised Harry was that no one had seen the ghost of Fudge at Hogwarts. He vaguely remembered the Prophet mentioning his ghost would be haunting his family in Brighton.

Without a minister, Wizarding Britain was in an uproar. Over the course of a week, the papers had reported a startling increase in Death Eater activity. Riots occurred all over Europe, and the



Muggles were starting to notice. With a sick sort of amusement, Harry randomly wondered how his aunt and uncle would react if they had been told the truth.

The once quiet Dementors were sweeping through the Muggle world and attacking non-magic peoples. Hermione had reported over breakfast a few days later that the Muggle physicians and psychiatrists believed the soul-sucked to be victims of extreme catatonia.

While Hermione explained to Ron what catatonia meant, Harry read the newspaper over Neville's shoulder. Neville's eyes scanned the list of headlines while Harry's ran across a short article on the Death Eater attacks. "The damage seemed to have been aimed at a small Muggle parish in Ipswich..." Harry continued to skim, pausing for Neville to raise the paper higher. "...Was a bit of a row in Wexford..." His eyes continued to fly over the words until they landed on something rather interesting.

"...Among the deceased was none other than Igor Karkaroff, the former headmaster of Durmstrang Institute."

He furrowed his brow, and stared at the milk flagon between the quietly conversing Ron and Hermione. "Karkaroff's dead." He simply stated. Hermione's lips froze and she turned to Harry in interest.

"Karkaroff?" Ron inquired. "Wasn't he headmaster of Krum's school?" He asked with disrelish.

"Durmstrang," Hermione corrected with scrunched brows. "He was killed?"

Harry nodded, staring at the bowl of ripe apples. "By Death Eaters." Her head tilted slightly as a sign of thought.

"Wasn't he — ?"

"A Death Eater, yes." Harry answered, mashing the toast on his plate.

Ron made a noise of bemusement. "Why would — "

"He was a traitor, a coward," the young wizard replied, saddling his bag on his shoulder. "And that is what Voldemort hates the most. But not more than me." Standing up quickly, Harry walked up the aisle to the main doors, leaving his friends to gawp at his retreating back. He wondered why they still did this; it wasn't as if Harry hadn't done it all week, he had. Usually they scrambled to follow him. Their trips to class were usually silent. But today, Harry walked alone.

He was almost to the Charms corridor when he caught sight of a blue cloak with a head of red hair. "Kaltag," he called, quickening his steps to catch up. The Celestial paused to wait for Harry, offering a half-smile.

"Harry." His name came out in a sigh. Shrugging his knapsack closer, Harry stared at the corridor ahead.

"Are we still on for tonight?" He reminded the boy of their lessons. Harry was rather looking forward to setting something off and exerting his suppressed anger and guilt into wild plants.

A frown stained the Paraffin's face and his expression turned sour. "I'm sorry, we'll have to reschedule. I've an impromptu essay due for Snape tomorrow." He sighed disgustedly. "Six feet on the importance of curfews." Harry blinked.

"What? Why?"

Kaltag pinched the bridge of his nose. "He," the Being sighed again. "He caught me in the Astronomy Tower after patrolling hours. I was up there to think." The redhead answered Harry's unasked question. "And since it would look decidedly bad giving a prefect detention, I aimed for an essay instead. Besides, it's my forte."

It was Harry's turn to frown. "That isn't fair."

"It's Snape." The boy responded as if it were common knowledge. "There is no such thing as 'fair'." They walked in ill at ease silence before Kaltag resumed. "Considering I've an essay and work to do, I also have practice tomorrow night, and you have Quidditch training Friday whilst I'm tutoring. I would say ... Saturday, perhaps?"

"I — no, Defense Association meeting."

"Right." He shook his head, gathering his forehead. "We'll figure it out later, I suppose."

As they walked up the staircase, Harry noticed Kaltag toying with the reddish-black orb on his necklace. "So, what are you going to do with that?" Kaltag gave him a baffled look before realization consumed him.

He shrugged, shaking his head. "I don't know. Do you want it?" Harry proffered a dark look.

"No."

"Wouldn't be possible at any rate. I guess I could use it to keep Starbuck in line." The two shared a short chuckle as they entered the Charms corridor. "Kenward wouldn't take it back, so I'm stuck with it."

Harry's brow creased. "You tried to give it to him?" The prefect nodded.

"He says it's my responsibility, and I'm the new wielder and whatnot. I can't exactly give it to someone. It will only keep coming back to me until I die."

"I see." The rapid approach of footsteps behind them made the two twist around to view a ruby-faced Ron. His lanky legs carried him over to the pair and his hands moved to return his school robe from its haphazard state.

Harry noted the keeper arrived alone and commented on it. "Where's Hermione?"

Ron buttoned his front. "Boot pulled her aside for a word. Something about dates for History of Magic." He grumbled something unintelligible afterward with an unpleasant look.

The boys paused beside the door to Flitwick's classroom when Kaltag inquired, "Your friend Professor Hagrid still gone?" Harry and Ron nodded, staring at a group of passing third years whispering fiercely over some parchment.

"Yeah. Professor Grubbly-Plank is filling in for him until next week." The corridor buzzed with low noise, signaling the end of breakfast.

"You know, I read in the Daily Prophet, since Minister Fudge is dead, people are calling for Bones, Shacklebolt or Moody to become the new minister." The Celestial enlightened. Harry's eyes widened while Ron gawked.

"Mad-Eye?" he cried. "He'd go mad and hex everyone at the Ministry!" The young wizard readily agreed, wondering how wild the wizarding world would be with Mad-Eye at the helm.

"Kingsley would be okay," Harry inferred. "Although Madame Bones is his superior."

"The elections have been moved up. We'll know by next week, I imagine." Harry vaguely wondered what the outcome of the election would be. On the one hand, Kingsley was rather experienced, being an Auror and having seen evil. However, Madame Bones was head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She was also on the Wizengamot, and from a respectable family. This brought another thought to Harry: why hadn't the people called for Dumbledore to be minister for magic?

Hadn't they urged and pleaded with him in the past? Not that Harry really cared that the headmaster wasn't asked. The last thing he needed was Dumbledore taking over the Ministry of Magic. As if he hadn't enough trouble already. Harry's thoughts were disrupted when Flitwick waddled through, telling them to get their work out. The class swept through the classroom in thunderous banter.

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Harry slammed the storeroom door shut and locked it. When he reached Ginny and Ron, the young witch handed him his Firebolt and the three proceeded to trek up to the castle. "I'd say that was a good practice." Ginny began. Harry stared at the white ground and nodded as Ron hummed.

"It was all right, not the best." He grouched, wiping at his forehead. "Our next match isn't until March, so we have some time to plan strategies and the like."

"Ravenclaw is playing Slytherin, right?" Ginny asked.

"Next week." Ron answered. "I'll have to watch the Ravensclaws closely, then." He bit the nail of his thumb.

Ginny puckered her lips. "You're not going to watch Slytherin closely?" Her brother shook his head as the Gryffindors climbed the steep part of the hill.

"Ravenclaw is more of a threat than Slytherin, right Harry?" They expectantly turned to the otherwise silent wizard. He nodded without a word. Ginny eyed Harry in perplexity as he stared at the snow.

"Something wrong?" she asked. He shook his head.

Ron lowered his brow. "You're not listening to Trelawney's predictions, are you? Gnomes aren't going to spring out of the ground and kill you. It's too cold for that."

Harry lamely nodded. "I know." He muttered. The Weasleys frowned.

They walked in silence before, "So, it's a good thing Cassand took over the lesson today." Ron brought up with forced brightness. "It was cool looking for clouds out the window, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"And when Trelawney and Sibley had a row about what the next lesson would be, yeah?" Ron prodded.

Harry inattentively nodded. "Yeah."

"Oh, and that time when Neville passed out because Parvati predicted his marriage to an American mountain troll?"

"Yeah."

The keeper showered the black-haired wizard with an unfavorable look. "That didn't happen, Harry." The Gryffindor's eyes shot up to glare at Ron. What was he trying to do? "You haven't been yourself, you know. It's driving us mad."

I know.

"Sorry," he apologized, gripping his broomstick tightly. "I'm just...worried about what's going to happen. You know, Fudge is dead and all."

"It's not your fault." Ron quickly stressed. Harry produced a black look anyhow.

"I know that. Don't you think I know that?"

Ron did not look convinced. "I know you know that, but do you believe it?"

"Ron — "

"You're not still blaming yourself, are you, Harry?" Ginny spoke up. Harry noticed displeasure laced her tone. They slowed their pace considerably as the torchlight from the entrance hall shone on them.

Harry was at a loss, cursing himself for not paying attention. The last thing he wanted was another lecture on how nothing was his fault. Everything was his fault; the prophecy said as much. Sighing, he steeled himself for a reply. "I just want the Ministry to be in the right hands." He answered evasively. "You saw how much trouble Fudge caused. If that happens again, Voldemort'll succeed." Ron flinched at the sorcerer's name.

Ginny made a thoughtful noise. "Who do you think could win?" They started up the steps.

Harry shook his head. "I don't — "

"Harry!" A familiar voice shouted from inside the castle. Harry and the Weasleys paused in the hall light, listening for the voice. A very flushed Hermione sped out from the doors, her cloak thrown messily over her shoulders, and something clutched in her fist. Terry Boot followed close behind with a serious look about him.

Furrowing his brow, Harry held his Firebolt closely. "Hermione, what's wrong?" The clever witch took a moment to catch her breath, and pushed her bushy hair out of her eyes.

"They're — everywhere," she panted, gesturing madly. "All over — the castle."

Harry wasn't following. "What?" Ron had seized the object from Hermione's fists, a paper. He climbed into the entrance hall, reading the paper as he ascended. When the others followed him, Harry observed an irritated expression blend over Ron's features. His face had twisted into a dark shade of red.

"What — is — this?" he hissed. Puzzled, Harry snatched the paper from Ron as Hermione's windedness slowed. It was a flier. Ginny looked over his shoulder as he began to read the flashy lettering:

THE SERPENTS OF BLACKEST NIGHT

If you're baffled about spells and aren't getting any suitable help...

Join The Serpents of Blackest Night today!

INCREASE YOUR MAGICAL ABILITY!

WE HAVE PROPERLY TRAINED INSTRUCTORS!

LEARN NEW SPELLS!

DUEL FOR EXPENSIVE PRIZES!

See President Draco Malfoy for an application and entrance fee.

Harry crushed the paper in his fist and tossed it aside. "They're all over the school," Boot repeated Hermione's words. "In common rooms, posted everywhere." Boot motioned to the stone walls. Harry finally noticed they were covered with garish fliers for the group.

Ron tore a flier from the wall and read it with disgust again. "Sounds like a mini-Death Eater offshoot if you ask me." He condemned. "Their flier's missing something. Shouldn't they put in a word about all the exciting dark magic spells they'll be using?"

"Ron!" Hermione reproved.

His annoyed look rounded on her. "What? I'm only stating truth, Hermione, and you can't exactly judge me on that."

The prefect did not move to argue. "And he's charging people to join! That snake!"

"He is a Slytherin, Ron." Ginny prompted. She gave the pensive Defense Association leader a short glance. "The D. A. will have seen these. D'you think we'll lose members to them?"

Hermione's stance stiffened, her eyes narrowed. "If they know better, they'd know Malfoy's only trying to buy them into it. What they learn with him won't be of any real quality."

"And besides, it's Malfoy," Ron emphasized angrily. "Who'd be the proper instructors? Crabbe and Goyle?" Ginny snorted while Harry's frown deepened. Would his members really see past Malfoy's ruse?

"And I'll bet he'll only allow purebloods in the group." The sixth year witch added in surfeit. Boot agreed as Ron began to rip the fliers off the wall, Ginny moving to assist him. Hermione offered the burdened Gryffindor a sympathetic look, patting his arm. "What will we do, Harry?"

Harry stared at a gaudy flier opposite him, hearing the satisfying tears from both Weasleys ripping down fliers. Slowly he turned to Hermione, his face expressionless. "We will have our meeting tomorrow night," his voice was surprisingly calm and low, "and we'll see."

Hermione evenly nodded and stared at the fuming siblings. "We'll see."

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Harry didn't sleep well that night. His dreams consisted of either stalking darkness or flashing announcements of Malfoy's group. When he couldn't find rest, the Gryffindor grudgingly awakened and dressed warmly. It wasn't time for breakfast yet, and wandering the school didn't sound as appealing as it would have years ago.

As he yanked on his trainers, Harry spotted the hangings pulled back and the empty bed beside his. His brow creased, Harry stood and walked to the doorway, determined to find out where the Celestial had escaped.



He met no one in the common room or the corridors save for a few of the early rising students, and decided the best place to find Kaltag would be the greenhouses. Wrapping his scarf securely around his neck, Harry pushed through the entrance doors and braved the cold. Snow fell lightly over the wintry landscape and Harry found himself muttering banishing spells to clear a path. He finally trudged over to Greenhouse Four and carefully opened the door.

He wasn't exactly surprised to see the Paraffin in a black cloak, compelling a puffapod to grow. The Being's glowing green eyes descended on the Gryffindor carefully undoing his scarf. "Morning." He greeted in a subdued tone. Harry smiled blandly.

"Couldn't sleep?" He asked. The Celestial paused, staring at the flourishing puffapod.

He propped against the worktable. "Not that I tried." He vaguely answered as his eyes blushed to its original shade. Before Harry could inquire further, the Being thwarted him by asking, "Now that you're here, you want to do a bit of work with your abilities?" Swallowing his backhanded response, Harry settled for a head bow. Whatever it was, the prefect obviously didn't want to talk about it. "Off with the cloak and let's begin." He ordered, shrugging his own off. "The more you practice, the warmer you'll get."

Harry practiced some of his defensive tactics, such as vine summoning and even blocking. He continually mopped the sweat from his brow as he summoned plant after plant, growing some and wilting others as instructed.

As they practiced, Harry admitted to Kaltag that he'd finally confessed to Ron and Hermione about his abilities. He conveniently left out the information on the prophecy, knowing that the more people were informed, the more unsafe it would be. Kaltag chuckled pleasingly and retorted, "Ickle Gryffindor is growing up." Harry proceeded to chuck a pot of manure at his head.

His training stepped up a bit after Kaltag began using his wand to throw spells at him. Harry would have found it much easier to use his wand to duel, but Kaltag specifically stated he could only use his elemental gift. After the fifth Stunning Spell whizzed millimeters past

his head, Harry was finding it increasingly difficult not to pull out his wand and fight back.

"Oh, for the last time, Potter," the Paraffin griped. "Put up a block. Defend yourself. Do something."

"I'm trying!"

"Not hard enough." Harry clenched his teeth and growled behind the bench of shivering Mandrakes, his fists trembling.

He suddenly sprang up from behind it and glared at the prefect, gathering all of his frustration about him and bellowed, "BIND!" at the Celestial. A groaning noise was heard from above. Harry watched in satisfaction as a thick bough coiled fiercely around the startled Being, squeezing his arms to his sides and forcing him to drop his wand. The vine wound tightly around the boy's chest, moving up his body at a rapid rate.

"Er, Harry," grunted Kaltag as he struggled with his bonds, "You might want to stop it from reaching my neck."

"Oh!" Harry exclaimed. Focusing sharply, Harry stared at the snaking limb. "Stop." The branches continued on their path, already moving up the Being's shoulders. "Stop." Harry firmly ordered. Nothing. Kaltag groaned as the broad ropes twined stiffly around the base of his neck. Harry's eyes widened and he recklessly shouted, "Stop. Stop! STOP!"

Finally, the winding branch obeyed. Kaltag breathed a sigh of relief, mimicked by Harry. The Being nodded slightly, as the limb was clasped firmly around his throat. "Impressive, Potter." He grunted. Despite the fact he almost killed his housemate, Harry was ecstatic. He could attack someone now!

Kaltag squirmed a little, grunting with effort. Harry slowly advanced. "Do you want me to...?"

"No, no," he hurriedly returned. "I can do it. You've done enough already." Harry smirked to himself, pausing near a stand of Flutterby bushes. Kaltag remained still, his forehead creased as he stared at his inhibitor. After a few minutes, his brow wrinkled considerably and his frown deepened. The rope hadn't budged.

Harry gave him an intent look and furrowed his brow. "Something wrong?"

Kaltag's eyebrows lowered. "I...I don't know." He writhed anxiously and groaned. "What...? I — I don't have the earth force anymore." He declared. Harry's eyes enlarged.

"What?"

"I can't feel it." He began tugging away from the branch securing him in place.

"Has this ever happened before?"

"No! Never." The Celestial's voice was higher now. The prefect abruptly focused his attention on a potted shrub a few feet away. Harry observed an intense look of concentration on his face. The boy's eyes narrowed to slits, and his breath was coming out in pants. All at once, Kaltag shouted in frustration and began frantically pulling away from the immobilizing branch. "I can't even mature a plant!"

Harry was worried by now. "Try another force." The Being grit his teeth and stared at another plant, then another, and then another.

Nothing. His eyes weren't even glowing. The Gryffindor approached the Paraffin and started to yank at the bindings. They were clasped pretty tight. "Are you feeling all right? Could you be sick?"

Kaltag pulled away from Harry, grinding his teeth. "I don't know!" He growled. "I don't know why this is happening!" Harry gripped part of the limb closely and tried to break through. His palms were sweaty and aching when he couldn't detach it. The wizard was suddenly alarmed when he understood that Kaltag's lack of forces might not make him a Celestial anymore. If this were the case, what would happen to him?

It seemed as if the Paraffin read his thoughts, because he began throwing his body fiercely against the ropes. "This—can't—be—happening!" He growled, flogging himself around. Harry was overwhelmed when the Being abruptly stopped thrashing about and acquired a dazed look.

Mechanically, the Being turned to the nearby Flutterby bush and ogled it for a moment. The plant automatically sprouted a dozen shoots and leaves. Harry gaped, watching as Kaltag composed himself as best as he could and nodded at the twine with narrowed green eyes. Obediently, it unraveled and slithered to the ceiling.

Harry stumbled back in shock as the last of the vine wriggled from the poised student. Kaltag gingerly ran his fingers across his moderately bruised neck and faintly winced. His gaze softened from emerald to blue and he carefully cleared his throat. "Well," he began gently, "Panicked there for a second."

That was an understatement and Harry knew it. The Gryffindor grabbed for his robe and pulled it on, watching the prefect do the same. "What was that?" he inquired silently.

Kaltag briefly halted from buttoning his robe and looked away from the gaping Gryffindor. "Force embolus, I suppose." He murmured, retrieving his wand. Harry looked quite skeptical.

"Maybe you should go to Madam Pomfrey." Harry couldn't believe he'd suggested this, since he wasn't overly fond of being in the Infirmary himself. Kaltag tendered a contradictory look before he shook his head.

"No, I think I'm all right."

Harry knit his brows. "What if it happens again?" Kaltag breathed heavily before reducing his orbs.

"I'll handle it." The Gryffindor wasn't convinced.

"Kaltag — "

"I said, I'll handle it." Harry knew when the conversation was dropped. Kaltag sounded threatening enough, but Harry caught the haunted look in his eyes. Had he known what happened? What was he frightened about?

The wizard snapped back to attention when the door slammed to signal the Celestial's exit. Drawing his brows in befuddlement, Harry directed his attention to the gray Bell-Curved Sentiments along the wall rack.

Raising his brow at the plants, they burst into vivid yellow and burgeoned blooms. He decided he had better things to worry himself with than analyzing the cross prefect. Harry threw his scarf around his neck and headed for the exit. Breakfast would start about now anyway.

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Harry folded his hands behind his back. "One last time. Next set, Addling Spell."

Five students stood side by side and aimed their wands at the battered test mannequin. "Verso!" Five voices shouted simultaneously. The dummy whirled on its axis, its limbs failing around. Harry nodded.

"Next set, again." The first set beamed proudly and moved to the side while the next five repeated their actions. Five jets of light soared toward the dummy and it didn't spin with as much force as the first time. "Focus, Creevey." Colin beamed as though he were about to pee himself from being singled out by Harry. Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Harry ordered, "Last set, and remember to concentrate."

The last group lurched forth and succeeded with their task. "Excellent." The witches in the group silently squealed and went back to their cushions. As the mannequin's movements settled, Harry crossed his arms, waiting for the buzz to calm down. "All right, you've done great this evening." Several shouts and high fives were exchanged, and Harry waited for silence. "For the rest of the evening, we'll be learning the Thrice Guard. It is a moderately advanced shield, and will probably take some time for you to learn." The Defense Association members sat up in interest as Harry leaned against the bookshelf.

"The Thrice Guard has three visible layers that will protect the spell caster from all spells with the exception of the Unforgivables. The layers will shatter one at a time when hit with a spell; certain levels won't break, depending on the intensity of the spell. This is not used as a permanent shield. The wizard casts the spell as a diversion; this gives them time to find a quick plan or spell to use before the final shield is broken through.

"The incantation is *Trinus tutaminis*, pronounced TRY-noose too-TAH-min-iss. Pronunciation is everything. You don't want to botch this spell if a dark wizard is on your tail." The students chuckled appreciatively. "Also, your wand must move in a square-like motion, like so." Harry pulled out his wand and traced a jerky pattern in the air.

"To demonstrate, I'll need a volunteer." It was no surprise Hermione's hand shot up quickly and she was nearly hopping on her cushion. Harry grinned amusedly. "Maybe, Hermione?" The clever witch smiled and hastened to the front of the room. She eagerly pulled out her wand.

"Hermione will send a spell at me, and — not yet, Hermione," the Gryffindor bit back her incantation and blushed. "And a shield will form to protect me from it. She will keep sending spells at me until my last shield is broken. Ready?" He turned to Hermione. Her wand was set and she nodded. Harry began the wand movements and incanted the spell.

A blue light erupted from the tip of Harry's wand and formed three thin but solid rectangles before him. It looked as if only large glass windows protected him. Hermione began firing off spells one at a time. She paused as the guard absorbed the Stunning Spell and it splintered. Hermione did this two more times and affected the same result. "And then I would throw a curse at her." Harry lightly explained. "Thank you, Hermione. Pair up and start working. Distance yourselves, too."

The meeting went on smoothly, with many students getting the hang of the spell by their fifth or sixth try. The problem was, many of them couldn't keep it up long enough. One Hufflepuff kept squealing excitedly as their shield went up, but at the first thrown spell, all three shattered. Harry tried to help as many as he could, but figured it was individual magical prowess that determined the outcome. He could hardly assist there.

Harry wandered around the room, helping with wrist and wand coordination as well as pronunciation. He couldn't believe the amount of people speaking the incantation incorrectly. Harry wasn't the least bit surprised the drawn Ravenclaw seeker was among them. Michael Corner only threw him suspicious glances as he

passed. Harry vaguely speculated if he would join Malfoy's group. He was reluctant to join the Defense Association at the beginning.

Moments later, Harry called for attention and dismissed the group amiably. Many stacked their cushions away and headed for the door in deep conversation. Colin waved giddily and followed Neville and Dean out the door.

As Harry turned to the approaching Ron and Ginny, he noticed someone striding to him with purpose. He almost sighed in despair from Zacharias' determined look. Harry crossed his arms and waited impatiently. Ron saw him looming and his face contorted. "How come you don't give out prizes, Potter?"

"Shut up." Ron spat unpleasantly before Harry could open his mouth. Raising his chin in the air, Smith walked away affronted. Ron shook his head in disgust. "Hufflepuffs."

Nearby, a group of sixth and seventh year Hufflepuffs gasped and gave him scandalized looks. Realizing his error, Ron quickly tried, "I didn't mean all of you, I meant — "

But they didn't wait for his explanation and tramped away with deep scowls. Harry and Ginny frowned at the prefect. "We're trying to keep members from Malfoy, Ron. You're handing them off with our regards." She admonished. Ron's face reddened and he began to splutter his argument, but they were interrupted by a wistful voice.

"Hello, Harry." Luna Lovegood greeted. Harry gave a half-hearted wave while Ron forced a smile on his face.

"Hello, Luna..." Ron began with put on optimism, followed by the barely audible, "...tic."

Harry heard the sharp groan that could only be associated with Ginny's elbow connecting with her brother's ribs. Luna smiled prettily at Ron, seemingly unaware of his previous insult. Ginny cheerily grinned. "Evening, Luna."

The fifth year Ravenclaw faced Harry again with wide eyes. "I will not join Malfoy's group, Harry," she stated with conviction. "Black night serpents are strange creatures."

"How so?" Ginny asked.

Luna's eyes widened with oddity, and she tilted her head with interest. "They're believed to be extinct, but I don't think so." The young Weasley merely smiled and directed the eccentric Ravenclaw toward the exit.

"Tell me all about it." They disappeared after a few seventh years. Ron sighed in relief at Luna's departure, but stroked his stomach through his robes.

"Don't think I could've stood for another one of her wild theories." Harry absently nodded watching Ella and Kaltag walk away. The Being gave him a plain smile before exiting; but something about his shuttered look still gnawed at Harry.

He was so preoccupied in his musings, Harry barely felt the tap on his shoulder. "Potter," Harry whirled around and rested his eyes on Michael Corner. The wizard had an empty but serious look in his eyes and pursed lips. "Can I have a word?" Lowering his brows, Harry turned to Ron but found the redhead already marching over to Hermione and Terry Boot. A fleeting glance around the still occupied Room of Requirement let him know that Cho Chang had yet to leave.

"Sure." They traveled a short distance to the crook nearest the door. Harry leaned against the wall with crossed arms as Michael shifted restlessly. After a few silent minutes between them, Harry grew fed up. "You wanted?" He poked.

The brooding wizard broke from his daze. "I'm quitting the Association," his gaze flicked over to an obvious part of the room, "for delicate reasons." Harry thought a bad breakup was hardly an excuse, but didn't comment on it.

"I see."

Michael's brow evened before he grinned condescendingly. "I know what you're thinking." Harry refrained from snorting, instead shaking his unmanageable mane.

"You couldn't possibly."



The sixth year Ravenclaw faltered before examining Harry's indifferent veneer. "Not that I'm joining the Slytherin group, mind you, but lately I've been absolutely loaded with schoolwork." Corner quickly reasoned.

The Gryffindor raised a brow. "We're in about the same classes. I understand the workload." Harry rationalized his involvement in Quidditch, three defense groups and Elemental lessons; even he found time to attempt other things. This entire conversation was silly. Constraining a smile Harry fibbed, "Nevertheless, I'm sorry to see you go. Best of luck to you." He held out his hand Michael took it without hesitation, shaking it firmly.

"Thanks, Potter." Michael left the Room of Requirement without looking back. Shortly after, Cho and her associates (those few brave enough to withstand her emotions) followed.

Tiring of the glib students lingering behind, Harry ushered them into the hallway and closed the door after him. Ron was loitering ahead, between Hermione and Terry Boot and Harry closing up, his eyes firmly on the talking classmates. As soon as Harry came within range, Ron muttered, "Honestly, who does he think he is?" Confused, Harry followed his gaze and pursed his lips.

"I dunno. You tell me."

Ron's ears were redder than the colors in Gryffindor's common room. At Harry's furrowed temple Ron huffed, "Haven't you noticed Hermione's been rather scarce half this month?" No, Harry hadn't noticed. He tried to avoid Hermione and sometimes Ron for a week, but he nodded anyway. "That's because she's been in the library. With Boot!" Ron spat.

"Where's the problem in that? They're probably just studying." He observed the two in deep conversation, both with books in hand. The keeper flushed brighter than his hair.

Ron grated his teeth. "Studying? Studying? I think he's doing more than that!" he seethed, growling at the back of the Ravenclaw's head. "I don't trust him." The Gryffindor shoved his fists under his arms mumbling to himself. "Horrible Ravenclaws, right up there with Slytherins. Don't trust him at all."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" Harry frivolously suggested. He just wasn't in the mood for Ron's ravings. The redhead's face relaxed somewhat and he was left to his own thoughts. Hermione didn't seem to hear them, nor did it appear as if she knew they were behind her. She looked far too absorbed in her discussion with Boot.

Harry directed the incensed conversation to what nonsense they would fill into their prediction chart for Trelawney this week. He didn't notice the group altered direction until his shoulder sharply connected with something hard and stiff. Harry twisted on his heel to eye the thing he bumped into, a wild-eyed Slytherin boy with a fierce scowl. "Well, well," an identifiable voice drawled. "Fancy meeting you here, Potter."

Draco Malfoy's pointy face came into view, surrounded by his entourage of Slytherins. Malfoy sneered and thrust his chest out, lifting his nose in the air. The light caught off of a shiny badge under his prefect pin, with a snake under a crescent moon, a wand in its fangs. All of the Slytherins were wearing a brooch. The remaining Elite members had their hands on their wands, their eyes fixed for any sign of suspicious movement. "Having another one of your Dismal Association gatherings?" The group robotically chortled.

"What could you possibly want with me, Malfoy? You have what you wanted." Harry wearily reminded. The blond gave a nasty leer of triumph.

"It was entirely your fault, Potter. You didn't allow us to join."

Harry's face screwed up. "The Defense Association had an open door policy. You refused to join and had to try to obtain things your way." He carelessly shrugged his shoulders. "Your loss."

"Ah, you mean my gain." Draco replied smugly. The Slytherin smirked. "Now, all of your members will see what a joke your little fan club really is. They'll want to know what real power is, and they'll want a taste. They will come to me on bended knee to join." The Gryffindor's emerald eyes narrowed with each sentence.

"In your dreams, Malfoy." Voltaire Selene Magnus countered.

"Harry is ten times the leader you'll ever be." Nikola growled. His gray eyes appraised her with interest.

"We'll just wait and see." He jeered. Crabbe and Goyle snorted stupidly.

Hermione's nostrils flared. "What do you think you're going to accomplish with this?"

Malfoy's lip curled in disgust, as if he would rather be cleaning with house elves than address the smart witch. He glared maliciously. "More than your little guild has." His button glinted in the torchlight.

Ron scoffed. "Shouldn't you have already been taught dark spells from Death Eater training camp?" The ginger-haired prefect snarled. The Slytherin's fists clenched.

"I'll have you know, Weasel — "

"Malfoy." Hermione warningly interrupted. Draco's gray eyes constricted and he faked a gag.

"Keep my name out of your filthy mouth, Mudblood."

"Don't call her that!" The Gryffindor wizards and Boot shouted.

The Slytherin with the brutish eyes leered in mocking. "Mudblood scum, just like the rest of her kind — "

And then it happened. Harry spotted the crazed Slytherin pull his wand out first, but Seamus tackled him. He heard punches land, but he wasn't sure who was getting pummeled. Malfoy's wand was in his hand and a spell was launched from it already. Harry threw out a sloppy rebounding curse and watched as the wealthy student dodged it.

Harry hadn't even noticed the Elite members efficiently blocking and sending out curses and hexes. As suddenly as the fracas had started, it finished. Before he knew it, Hermione was sending a spray of sparks between the foes, but most were scattering. Malfoy glared one last time at Harry and tramped away with Crabbe and Goyle. Seamus stood from the floor, wiping his dribbling nose with the hem of his robe.

"You'd better get to Pomfrey." Boot suggested. Seamus gingerly touched his nose and flinched. "I'll take you."

"I'll come with." Selene offered. With a nod and a rushed apology from Harry, Seamus was escorted away. The other Elite members parted ways to their own common rooms. Hermione, Ron and Harry began their silent walk, with a few Paraffins trailing behind. Ron nudged Harry's bruised shoulder, garnering a grimace. He seemingly missed it.

"You're not going to let Malfoy get away with this, are you?" The keeper demanded.

Harry let his irritation shine through. "Well, it isn't as if I can storm in and put a stop to it." He argued. "If he passed the idea on to Snape, you know the bat approved it regardless. If Dumbledore had rejected it, Malfoy probably would've cried foul and would have taken it to the governors, saying Dumbledore's using favoritism." Hermione agreed with a nod.

"But he's not." Ron insisted in misunderstanding.

"Not according to Malfoy." He shook his head. "He probably told Snape it was a study group, and weeks later, he's in." The dark-haired wizard bitterly summarized.

The young Weasley scowled. "That's not fair."

"Since when do Slytherins play fair, Ron?" Hermione chimed in.

"But what about the Slytherins in the Defense Association? Nott and Zabini, they had to have known something." The flame-haired prefect persisted.

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "They could have, and possibly deemed it as hearsay or a hoax." Ron favored her with an angry look.

"You're favoring them." He accused.

Hermione pursed her lips and waved him off. "Nonsense." Ron's shoulders tensed and he favored the empty hallway with a hard look.

"Slytherins always stick together in the end. No matter what." She glowered at him.

"Now, that is the kind of negative attitude that fuels this war."

Ron did not respond, only murmuring silently to himself. Harry silently pondered the witch's words as they neared the common room, strident conversation audible even from two corridors away.

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A/N: Read and review.

Chapter Twenty-Four Clues:

1. A leader for a new era.
2. Romancing the witch.
3. Sirius returns with startling information.

## Chapter Twenty-Four: Nevermore

"Relax, Hermione." Ron advised after what seemed like the seventeenth time. Hermione ignored him again, instead inspecting the head table with an apprehensive look. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who flicked the brittle edges of his bacon at an unsuspecting Icarus. "Oh, for — ! They're not going to say anything." He hissed at the uneasy witch.

Hermione simply frowned at the table holding the Slytherins and Aves and picked at her breakfast. Ron piled more food onto his plate. "It's been three days! If they wanted to get us in barney, we'd already be there." The clever witch lowered her brow and looked to her other friend for support.

"Harry?" She prompted.

"Ron's right." He apathetically replied. Said Gryffindor hummed in triumph as Hermione scowled.

"A professor could have shown up at any time and there wouldn't be a Defense Association anymore!" She attempted to pull at their heartstrings. Harry casually sipped his pumpkin juice as Ron gave him a wide grin.

"Good thing they didn't eh, Harry?"

Harry halfheartedly raised his glass. "Cheers." He heard a groan across from Ron.

"Lucky we didn't get a detention."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Lucky we didn't get caught! That was horrid!" Her eyes instinctively drifted back to the head table, and followed afterward to the Averins.

The redheaded prefect huffed. "They're not going to tell anyone. No one's caught us. And Seamus took care of Pomfrey." Restated Ron firmly. Harry reflected back to when Seamus arrived in the dormitories very early in the morning. He said he told the Mediwitch his nose was broken due to roughhousing; she just did not realize the literal implication.

Harry very much doubted she wholeheartedly believed Seamus' story. "Besides, they lost. The last thing the Slytherins want the entire school to know is that they lost a fight to Gryffindors." Ron laughingly resumed.

Harry tipped his head to the side to stare at Ron. "Worse, if we were Hufflepuffs...." Ron snorted.

"Funny," she slickly began, "You weren't saying that when they nearly wrecked you in Quidditch." Ron and Harry successfully shut up.

Ron's retort was effectively hindered when the morning mail soared in. Students swatted the feathery messengers from their breakfast plates and droned on. Harry was taken aback when an aged gray owl landed in front of him and held out its leg. After the message was successfully retrieved, the accomplished owl pinched a few scraps from Harry's platter. Harry unfurled the parchment and deciphered Sirius' quickly scrawled:

Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend by return owl.

Harry turned the parchment over and made a noise of reason at finding it expectedly blank. "Borrow a quill, Ron?" The redhead waved distractedly as he read a short letter. Harry fetched a worn quill from Ron's bag and replied Sunday, February 14th. The owl flew off after Harry strapped the note to its leg. As he handed the quill back to Ron, he raised his brow at the redhead's curious look. "What?"

"What was that?" Asked Ron, his brow crowning near his fringe.

Harry shrugged, gulping down his juice. "Nothing." The younger wizard disregarded Hermione's suspicious look.

"Well, who's it from?" She pushed.

A sigh escaped Harry's lips. "Nobody." They were still too involved in his matters. Even if the message was from Sirius, Harry felt bothered enough to keep his best friends wondering.

His response made Hermione's eyes glimmer in the same curious manner she acquired right before she hurried to the library to quench it. "Now why would nobody write nothing to you?"

Unfazed, Harry parodied a reply, "I don't know. Maybe nobody had nothing to do." Ron was fruitlessly choking back a snort of amusement. Hermione's face dissolved into a frown.

"Harry — "

"Drop it, Hermione." The wizard brooked no tone for argument. Her dark eyes bore into him even as he turned away from his best friends. Harry knew he had been rather harsh and distant in the last few weeks, but they had to understand.

"Hm," Icarus murmured across from Harry, his nose buried in the Herald. "Good news. The school's nearly complete. We'll be able to move back in by August." A few sixth year Paraffins and Voltaires hunched around him, reading over his shoulder.

Seats away, Nikola slinked around a few second years to grimace over the black prefect. "Fantastic. Our summer's cut short." Hermione's face was hidden behind the Daily Prophet as Starbuck joined the discussion.

Harry opened his mouth to ask about the academy when he heard Dean exclaim, "Blimey! They've chosen one already?"

"What?" Hermione pulled the paper from under Ron's nose and held it before Harry's face.

A black and white picture of a rough-looking wizard smirked back at Harry. "Rufus Scrimgeour," she answered his implicit question. Harry's eyes ran over the man's tough façade. "The new Minister for Magic."

The day dragged on, with most conversations centered on the new Minister. Mixed reaction met the news, and Harry had little time to form an opinion on the man. From his picture in the Prophet alone he looked a better replacement for Fudge, but there was something curious about him Harry couldn't place.



Harry was pleased to see the return of Hagrid for their Care of Magical Creatures class. Though the half-giant looked worse for the wear, Hagrid was just as excited as ever, outlining the rest of the course for the remaining months. After class, he tried to badger the three into his cabin for rock cakes, but luckily, they had to attend Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Today, by far, had been the most difficult lesson, save for the instance when the intricate Barter Hex was introduced. Kenward started them on Nonverbal Spells and after some tips, set them on their way. Only a handful of students managed to achieve the smallest of spells — Hermione included, of course — but Harry thought he saw Ron's book give a feeble short of shake when he tried to levitate it.

The weather was rather unsettled, windy one moment and wet with thaw the next. Harry opted to stay in the warm common room rather than join some of his housemates outside. He was glad he at least had Ron as a companion. Then again, Ron was only there because Hermione wasn't in the library with Terry Boot for a change. Harry presumed he only remained because he needed Hermione's Astronomy notes.

But after a good hour of silence, Ron managed to bring up, "What is it with you and Boot?"

Hermione blinked up from her History of Magic book, her cheeks stained with red. "Oh, well, Terry and I have been studying." Ron's eyes narrowed.

"Right. Studying." He weighed. Hermione gave him a look of exasperation.

"Yes," she snapped. "Terry knows the importance of revising. Something you two ought to have an interest in."

Harry threw his hands up from his slow scribbling. "Leave me out of it."

"I'm interested in studying." Ron indignantly affirmed. If he was, he sounded awfully unimpressive, Harry considered. Hermione raised a brow and turned her attention back to her textbook.

"Please, the only thing you have eyes for are flying balls and brooms in the air." She retorted.

The keeper's ears inflamed. "Shows how much you think you know." Harry heard him mutter. He concentrated on finishing his essay as Hermione and Ron flung dispute after dispute at one another. He had almost completely blocked out their voices when he heard his name.

"...Harry doesn't think so, do you Harry?" Hermione inquired with sharp eyes. The Gryffindor tore his eyes away from his essay to meet expectant faces. Ron was flushed from quarrelling and Hermione appeared quite red herself. He realized he had no idea what they were disagreeing about.

"Er..." he stalled, wagging his quill to defer an answer. "...No?"

"You see?" Hermione triumphantly accused. "Harry doesn't think so at all."

"Right..." Harry distractedly backed. Ron looked at him with a mixture of disappointment and treachery.

"Really, Harry," he growled. "How can you believe that flobberworm's not interested in Hermione?"

Harry's eyes widened. How did he wind up in this conversation? The truth was, he neither knew, nor cared about what the Ravenclaw and his friend did. "I...er, well...studying..." He lamely endeavored.

"That's what they all say." Ron seethed, glaring at Hermione. She simply rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, exactly what are you studying?"

The witch narrowed her eyes warily. "Since when do you care whom I study with?" The redhead's face colored faintly.

He choked, "I don't," but he swiftly rectified, "Well, I do, but..."

Hermione's left brow rose. "You do?"

"I do, I mean..." Ron fumbled, turning steadily redder until he almost hysterically sputtered, "But it's just studying, right?" By now, several Gryffindors and Paraffins were watching the exchange.

Her lips altered into a thin line of disapproval. "If you must know, I've been looking into this Child of Phoenix issue." She murmured over her essay. Harry's attention immediately shifted. He stared hard at Hermione.

"What?"

Sighing wearily, Hermione shut her textbook and leaned in close to both boys. "Well, this rumor has been circulating all over the school, and people are creating these pipe dreams about this Child of Phoenix. No professor has spoken about it, and I doubt even Dumbledore believes this prophecy." She informed. "So, I thought I'd look into it a bit more so we know what fraud we're looking for now."

Harry ignored her skeptical tone and moved closer, asking, "Did you find anything?" about the same time Ron crossly inquired, "Why Boot?"

The clever prefect crossed her arms and threw her fellow a slightly harassed look. "He needed help with revising, and besides, he was there when the prophecy was spoken."

"Yes, but why Boot?" Ron insisted. Hermione ignored him and favored a look toward Harry.

"I've been reading tons and tons of books," she began, absently thumbing through pages of the book in her lap. "There is very little information out there on this supposed Child, but I have found a few theories."

This spiked Harry's interest. "Theories? What about?" Inquired the seeker.

Hermione smoothed out a page of her book. "There's one theory by a noted anthropologist, Khirbi Whippleweston, that the Child of Phoenix might be a Bellotaur."

"A what?" The boys simultaneously asked. Hermione issued an annoyed sigh.

"You honestly haven't read a thing when it comes to History of Magic, have you?"

"Well, we don't have that class anymore," the redheaded wizard reminded. "So, what's the point?"

Hermione's brown eyes grew fierce. "The point is — !"

"What is a Bellotaur, Hermione?" Harry barged in, wanting to get information before the two got another spat in.

The brown-haired witch breathed calmly before regarding Harry with a lenient stare. "The Bellotaur were thought to be seven invincible warriors that destroy evil. Whippleweston thought the Child of Phoenix, or as he calls it, 'Phoenix Warrior', to be the youngest."

Harry digested the information slowly. A Bellotaur. A warrior. Thought to be invincible. Where would an invincible warrior be found? Hogwarts certainly wasn't his first choice to look.

Ron's eyes narrowed at the subdued witch. "And why haven't you come to us with this information before?" Hermione rolled her eyes.

"These theories are implausible." She hastily claimed. "I needed more information to prove or disprove them. Thus far, I'm neutral."

The red-faced wizard frowned. "But Bellotaur, they're good, and — "

"These are the theories of other wizards, Ron. Theories. None of them have met the Bellotaur; Bellotaur are said to be mythical, living dozens of centuries ago, and just as old." Hermione expanded doubtfully. "These theories hail from investigators of Seers and mythmakers. We can't rely on their words. Besides, some of the other theories I read stated Bellotaurs were ruthless killers. We can't trust schemes that contradict themselves."

Ron leaned into his seat, throwing his arms across his chest. Harry followed suit, but tangled himself in his thoughts. The Bellotaur could be good or bad? Did Voldemort know about them, and find some? If that was the case, did the Bellotaur even exist?

As Hermione turned back to her book, Harry noticed one of his visiting dorm mates dropping into the armchair across from her. Starbuck took in the concentrated face of Ron and the slightly annoyed expression of Hermione. Harry watched as he slapped his

hands on his thighs and perkily queried, "And what are we bickering about today?"

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The last weeks of January melted into a blur of February. Harry barely perceived this since their workload vastly increased. If he didn't know better, he would have thought they were taking their N.E.W.T.s next week. The professors were piling work on them as if their lives depended on it; in all actuality, Harry realized, their lives did depend on it. Or their futures, at any rate.

One major change was the shift of mood throughout the castle. After Scrimgeour was appointed minister, Harry noticed Aurors near the gates of Hogwarts and some even swept the halls one day. Purple pamphlets about individual safety were handed out in Charms, and signs of the same nature hung on the common room boards.

The atmosphere changed from one of cautious vigilance to overwrought tension and alertness within days. Attacks were frequently reported in the Daily Prophet, and Harry noticed students were sometimes called out of class or taken from mealtimes to be told the dreadful news. Parents and relatives were being killed or just plain dying from the stress of the war. Now more than ever, Harry was noticing the intent looks in his direction.

Although grave, the mood was not always so. There were times when Harry would bask in the normalcy of begging Hermione to copy her notes or talking to Ron about Quidditch. For what was probably the hundredth time this week, Ron nattered on about Slytherin's victory over Ravenclaw.

"What a surprise," he stated slowly, but sarcastically. Harry refrained from rolling his eyes for fear of losing his reading spot on valerian roots. "At this rate, we could not practice at all, play Ravenclaw, and still win! By a huge margin!"

"You do that, Ron." Harry distractedly murmured. He'd been stuck on the same paragraph for an hour now.

"It's that Cho Chang." Ginny joined in straight from the portrait hole. "I don't think she realizes she's actually playing the game." Harry

remained silent. Ron's eyebrow shot up as Ginny settled at a table behind the quietly reading Ella.

"And where were you?" He nosed, pushing his potions book away. Ginny considered him with an annoyed look.

She replied, "That's hardly any of your concern."

Ron conveyed a dramatic sigh and curled his lip asking somewhat spitefully, "Ah, so who's your man of the week?"

"It's really none of your business," Ginny began tartly, "But I was talking to Colin. He asked me to Hogsmeade."

Harry heard a rolling guffaw come from the boy beside him. Ginny and Hermione frowned as Ron continued, poking Harry to join him. "Fancy that!" He exclaimed around a fit of chuckles. "Ginevra Creevey! I rather like the sound of that!" And he burst into another fit of uncontrollable sniggers.

By now, various Paradors were glaring at Ron's disturbance, but Ginny was even more affronted. Her hair held no comparison to the scarlet of her ears and cheeks. "Well!" She snapped, glowering at Ron, "I'd better get used to calling Luna Lovegood my sister-in-law, as I'm sure she'd thoroughly enjoy that!"

Ron quickly sobered and straightened himself out. Hermione remained quiet behind her book. Harry, on the other hand, smirked at Ginny. "She's got you there, Ron." Ron mumbled something incomprehensible.

Ginny, pleased by her brother's reaction, smiled winningly. "I turned him down." Ron visibly relaxed. "And then Seamus approached me." Immediately, Ron tensed and began to splutter.

"Seamus? Seamus Finnigan?" He objected. "That brown-haired hooligan?" The witches frowned. Harry lowered his brows, somewhat agreeing.

"He's your housemate." Ginny harked.

The black-haired boy nodded. "Yeah, but it's Seamus." He awkwardly protested with a frown. "He is a bit of a wild one...."

The female chaser tilted her head to the side with a smirk. "You're just jealous." She teased. Harry feebly began to stammer in protest when Ginny laughed aloud. "I'm joking. But I turned him down." Both wizards eased at this.

Right away, a disapproving look rattled Ron's countenance. "Why do you always do that?" He reproached, looking unusually weary. "Stringing me along like that."

"Because you're so gullible," Ginny answered without looking up. "And I find it rather enjoyable. You're horribly overprotective." These words sounded less cheerful than her previous statement.

Harry studied Ron's long face. "You're my sister," he implored tightly. "There are tons of prats out there and — "

"And you don't want to see me get hurt, how very big brother of you." Ginny insultingly waved off. "I can handle myself." Ron sat ready to confront her.

"But, Ginny — "

"I can handle myself." She forcefully persisted.

Ron looked irked and stared at his sister's profile. "Just be careful with boys." Ginny's face whirled in his direction and she looked as if she was about to throw her quill at him.

"Ron — !" She warned.

"She can handle herself," Hermione chimed in, giving Ron a severe look.

"Just let her be." Ella unexpectedly added, giving them a warm smile. "She's old enough to make her own decisions, right?" Ginny shot the older witch an appreciative smile and nodded. Ella shrugged, returning to her book. "Let her alone." Oddly enough, Ron did not complain, and miserably went back to his potions book as the portrait hole opened. Several of the sixth year Paraffins spilled in with their tracksuits, both shivering and sighing in the warmth of the common room.

Many headed straight for the dormitories, while few stayed behind. "Dark — Force has to — s-stop," Harry heard someone shudder haltingly. "At least — until the — weather is warmer."

"Aye." Yorick squeaked, lurching up the steps after Starbuck. Quite a few Celestials agreed before they made it up the steps. Harry turned to Nikola, who just stepped into the common room and shook her head.

"Wimps." She muttered, grinning prettily at Harry. At his confused look, she explained, "Underwater curriculum." Harry's eyes widened as Hermione exclaimed.

"In the middle of the winter?" She all but screeched.

The Entity shrugged. "Whatever works." Harry stared at her disbelievingly.

"Where's Kaltag?" Ella suddenly inquired, eyeing the heads of the lingering Celestials. Harry glanced around and realized the Being was nowhere to be found. "I haven't seen him all day."

For some unexplainable reason, Nikola gave a shrill cry of laughter before standing up. She continued to convulse, much to the bewilderment of Harry and the others. Hermione looked slightly bothered by the Celestial's display, but did not comment. Ron looked vaguely amused, but it was obvious he did not know for what reason.

The blonde Entity began climbing the stairs, still laughing in unidentified amusement. All Harry could decipher between the turn of giggles was, "He fully deserved it! I can't wait for you to see this...!"

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The absent prefect returned to the dormitories after everyone had settled for bed and left before anyone woke up. Harry was decidedly curious now that the Celestial was clearly avoiding them.

He dressed quickly and headed out of the tower with Ron beside him and Starbuck trailing behind. They talked about aimless things, and Ron pointed out all the crumpled purple pamphlets littering the



corridors when he abruptly stopped near the entrance hall. "What happened?" He shouted, staring ahead. Harry followed his gaze and noticed the house hourglasses. Gryffindors rubies were rather low. "We haven't even had Snape yet!" Ron continued.

"Oh," Starbuck stated in realization. Harry just remembered he was following them. "That." Ron slowly turned to favor the Being with a glower.

"That'?" He sizzled, his voice deadly calm and dangerously low. Obviously Starbuck noted Ron's steadily coloring face, because he rushed through an explanation.

"Kaltag was being Kaltag in Einar's class," he resignedly enlightened. "Einar gave the wrong details on the Satyr Massacre of 1362, and Kaltag corrected him. Lectured everyone like he was there or something, and Einar went a bit mad on points. Didn't help when Kaltag insulted him." The Being looked as if he was fighting to keep a grin off of his face. "Used some very colorful words to express his dislike. Einar wasn't exactly thrilled."

Harry's brow wrinkled. He'd heard insulting Einar was like insulting Snape: No one came out unscathed. "Is that why Nikola was laughing at him?" They started back toward the Great Hall. Ron still looked miffed. A ghost of a smile appeared on Starbuck's face.

"Oh, no," he shot down. "She was laughing at him because he got his jaw smashed in Defense." Harry threw an equally confused Ron a baffled look. He didn't see the amusement in having one's jaw shattered: It meant re-growing bones. It meant pain. "Oh, don't get me wrong, it isn't at all funny. But this isn't the first time this has happened."

"Somehow I don't doubt that." Mumbled Ron.

Starbuck raised his bag higher on his shoulder. "Yesterday we were dueling in Chiron's, and brother dearest was having such a horrible day, really. For once, he was losing in combat against Xenik. So, he resorted to dirtier tactics — slighting Xenik's envy, trying to humiliate him, and this brought Xenik off the deep end. He forged his fist into a mallet and swung at him. And again, he didn't miss."

The wizards groaned audibly. Harry felt unpleasant tingles in his chin just from hearing it. "Ouch," Ron voiced his thoughts.

Starbuck nodded as if it were commonplace, which Harry could only assume it was. "Kaltag then broke Xenik's nose, chipped his cheekbone, and knocked a few teeth out. Nothing Mender Magus couldn't fix. Goodness knows she's used to it by now."

The younger wizard furrowed his temple. "I don't understand. Why is he avoiding us then?" Harry asked. If the Mender fixed everything, why was the Being dodging them? Embarrassment?

The Being smiled without answering, and Harry quickly learned he didn't need to. The three entered the Hall reverberating to raucous laughter. Harry could have been completely sightless and would have still known from where the laughter gushed.

They neared their usual spots and Harry noticed the loudest voices and chuckles came from the seat near his spot. His eyes caught Thanos wiping tears of mirth from his eyes and Icarus and Seamus falling over each other in amusement. "Headgear!" Basil wailed, belting out a cackle. "It still gets me!"

Several tables curiously craned their necks to get a good look at the rowdy Paradors, and some students out-and-out glared daggers at them. The Gryffindors did not seem to mind. Harry's eyes searched the faces around him for a clue to this madness before he found the source of their teasing.

There sat Kaltagonus, his eyes on his plate, and his hands in his lap, looking for all the world as if he had just lost his best friend. And he probably had, since Icarus took another look at him and erupted into a fit of cackles. Harry now saw why they were laughing: an unusual silver contraption framed the Being's jaw and forehead, just looking....

Well...laughable.

It was even more profound since Kaltag's black and blue jaw was set at a bizarre angle, frighteningly reminiscent of Mad-Eye Moody. It was something of a petulant scowl. His lower jaw was stiff, and his eyes remained on his plate. "Ha ha," Ron goofily snorted. "What happened to you?" Kaltag didn't look up.

All through breakfast, it seemed the Paradors could not stop their ridicule. Every chance they were given, the Beings and wizards poked fun at their own. The witches and Entities were more sympathetic, giving the boy gentle pats on the shoulder as they left the Great Hall. Harry was aware Kaltag never acknowledged them. Even Hermione, who scowled during the entire spectacle, stopped her quiet reassurances.

Aves and Slytherins went out of their way to round the Hall and passed by, mocking and leering at the quiet student. It wasn't until the mail soared in and Nikola began to thumb through the newspaper that some kind of response was provoked out of the prefect. "Oh, look at that, Kaltagonus. You've made page six." Informed the Entity in a flat tone.

Kaltag gave an indifferent twitch as a Ravenclaw pointed and laughed at his facial gear. "Celebrity Relationships in Memoriam, An Olympic Herald Exclusive," the strong Entity recited. She read off a number of names in boredom before she gasped overdramatically. "...And who can forget young Kaltagonus Smythe and Caprice Aubert!"

The Being's head snapped up, his eyes broad with something unreadable. Harry stuffed a pile of eggs in his mouth and observed as Kaltag icily stared at his brother. Starbuck's eyes suddenly bulged and he dropped his fork, swiftly twisting toward his brother in shock. "Hera's knickers!" Blurted the Being. "You've my attention! What d'you want?" Harry tracked the older Being's gaze to the avidly commenting Nikola.

"...Here you are at Bacchus', how charming! And look, you're feeding each other nuts...!"

Starbuck dully sighed, raising his eyes skyward. "Shut up, Nikola." She lowered the paper marginally to glare at her younger sibling.

"Shut it yourself, Starbuck." His hands came up in defense, motioning toward the silent prefect.

"Not me, Captain Metal-Chops over there."

The female's expression soured. "Oh, what's this?" Nikola affected cruelly. "What's that you're wearing? Could it be the matching pink sweaters she made for you? Absolutely adorable, wouldn't you say, Kaltagonus?"

Harry lifted a brow at the glare he sent in the Entity's direction. Immediately after, the brothers were fiercely staring at each other, the younger of the two with a horror-struck gaze. "Shut up and — Malakas!" Harry was startled by the change in language. The seeker spotted Starbuck struggling not to grin. "We do share a dorm with him, you know."

Harry could tell the ginger-haired boy was trying to smirk, but the attempt to move his jaw made the prefect wince in pain. The Entity leered scornfully. "Serves you right, you tosser."

Starbuck replied — red-faced — with a foul-mouthed response. Nikola leveled them both with a dark look. "Choke on it. Both of you." The other boys laughed again, obviously having not forgotten their housemate's humiliating dilemma.

Dean goaded, "You're not going to get much exercise with that mouth of yours for Valentine's, will you?" The boys' laughter only seemed to aggravate the prefect further. The unruly-haired wizard was starting to notice the dark red blotches staining Kaltag's cheeks.

Beside the blushing Endymion, Hermione's surly face came into view. "Oh, leave him alone." Icarus sniffed, his smile wavering.

"Hey, we're only joking." He pledged. Somehow, Harry noted, the blue-eyed boy's gaze appeared to become darker. Icarus followed with, "I'm sure your girl won't be able to tell your horrible kisses have become worse!" An entire dam of laughter exploded once more as the Being darkened six shades of rouge.

The witches merely frowned, and Hermione curved her brow. "And how would you know?" She swindled. At last, the laughter was directed at someone other than the thoroughly-had Being of the Elements. Harry heartily joined in chuckling at Icarus' horrified expression. Finally, the group of Paraffins stood to leave, hilarity still rumbling through them. Harry heard Basil continue to murmur, "Headgear! Gets me every year...!"

Harry trudged down the hall, making light conversation with Starbuck, as Kaltag remained silent. Ron and Hermione were very quiet next to him, until Harry saw Ron hesitate out of the corner of his eye.

Ron first looked at Harry, his face pale and his eyes a mixture of uncertainty and anxiousness. His eyes broke from Harry's perplexed gaze and settled on Hermione for a moment. "Er, Hermione?" The oblivious witch turned to him. Ron's brown orbs darted to Harry for a split second before they returned to Hermione. "Could...I have a word?"

The corners of Hermione's mouth turned down. "Now? We have Potions, and..."

"It'll only take a second." He sounded urgent. Hermione veered to give Harry a troubled glance. Harry, sensing the necessity in Ron's demeanor, waved a dismissal.

"Don't worry. I'll meet you there." Ron had dragged Hermione off before Harry even finished his statement. He vaguely wondered what Ron had to tell her that he couldn't say in front of him. Brushing the negative thoughts from his mind, Harry resumed walking alongside the Smythe brothers. He again struck up an exchange with the blonde Celestial, but as he spotted Kaltag's crooked jaw and disagreeable countenance, he couldn't resist. "You're very quiet, Kaltag." He grinned in jest.

The ginger-haired student merely gave Harry a black look, and his brother spewed into a chortle. "You do not want to know what he's calling you right now."

Nearing the dungeon, Harry's spirits lifted when he noticed Professor Jace greeting students at the door. He slapped Dean on the back and shook Ernie Macmillan's hand. Jace grabbed Harry's hand, shaking it enthusiastically and patting him on the shoulder. "Good to see you, Harry!" He messed about. Harry got a good chuckle when he heard Jace behind him, "Do chin up, Mr. Smythe! Smile!" He could only imagine the frown on the Being's face.

Moments later, Harry watched Ron and Hermione stride through, both looking decidedly red. He opened his mouth to question the grinning Ron as he sat beside him, but closed it as Snape walked in

the door, scowling deeply. There was no point in losing points for having his mouth hanging open.

The potions master strutted to the front of the room and alighted his glare on the sixth years. Jace hung to the far side, his hands shoved in his pockets. "What is the main use of a sopophorous bean, Mr. Montgomery?" Snape quickly singled out.

Harry grimaced as Basil stammered through a long-winded response, only to have Snape sneer and spotlight another student. Hermione stretched in her chair, her hand close to trembling. Snape produced an intolerant sigh and finally called on Hermione. She quickly spouted her textbook response and Snape curled his lip in disgust.

"And — " The abrupt bang of the door opening interrupted him, as Xenik nonchalantly sauntered in. It wasn't hard to glimpse his injuries, with his nose and cheeks a mixture of pale violet and blue. Harry hated to admit, he looked much better than his facial-gearred housemate. Jace squared his shoulders as if rearing to punish the Aves deputy, but Snape cut him off. "So nice of you to join us, Mr. Xenik. Take your seat." Harry knew Snape would never take points off his own house, even if the student were a temporary member.

Snape rounded on the class. "What potion relies on the reaction of the sopophorous bean?" Snape's black eyes surveyed the class for his next victim, and Harry swallowed thickly when his malicious gaze lingered on him. Surprisingly, the professor's eyes slid a few inches to his right. His smirk was merciless. "Mr. Smythe?" The Paradors reacted as appropriately as they could. They hadn't lost any house points yet.

Jace stood straight, a frown spread across his face. "Really, Professor Snape. You know the boy doesn't have full use of his mouth for the period of a day."

Snape's eyes bore impenitently into the young Being's. "There are other means he can employ to answer a simple question." Harry thought he heard a deep growl from his housemate, followed by a stifled moan. Already several of the Aves and Slytherin students were snickering at their tables. Malfoy flashed his 'Serpents' pin across the room at Harry. "Mr. Smythe? I'm sure you believe the

world revolves around you, but we, however, do not have all day. An answer, if you please."

"Snape — "

"Quiet, Jace." He hissed, glaring at the broken-jawed Being. "Five points from Parador." Harry couldn't believe Snape would be this cruel to his godson. Ron's fists shook, and he looked as if he were about to jump out of his seat to protest.

Which — sure enough — he did. "That's low, even for you!" The redheaded Gryffindor shouted. Snape's face dimmed and he snarled at Ron.

"Ten points for your boldness, Weasley." Malfoy and company laughed aloud, shaking their heads in disgust. Seething, Ron took his seat and threw the Slytherins a dirty look.

The Remedies professor advanced toward Snape until they were feet within each other. "That's enough, professor." Harry had never seen the jovial instructor so displeased.

Snape merely leered. "Five more points, Mr. Smythe. The clock is ticking." Several Gryffindors and Paraffins groaned, and Harry vaguely heard the snapping of quills from Icarus' table. He sympathetically turned to Kaltag, who — predictably — looked murderous, his eyes a bright golden orange.

"Kaltagonus!" Starbuck gasped, looking at his brother in disbelief. The elder Smythe threw his brother a dark glower as Starbuck shook his head in astonishment.

Harry examined Snape, whose eyebrow was raised in vile amusement. "Deadly thoughts toward a member of authority, Mr. Smythe? Another twenty points from Parador. I should report you for expulsion. Pathetic."

Garnet painted the cheeks of the mute Celestial, and his eyes burned even more in the face of the Slytherins' laughter. Harry was quite sure Kaltag would have protested and even lunged at the potions master for his embarrassment.

Without warning, one of the large jars on the shelf behind Snape's desk exploded, raining glass and the former jar's glutinous contents over both the desk and Snape.

Many students in the front shrieked, scuttling away. Harry wasn't sure whether it was the Being's anger or the backlash of a Parador that caused the jar to shatter. Once the mayhem was over, Snape looked positively venomous.

He was covered in what looked like rat tails, his hair shinier and greasier than ever, with thick glop dripping from his hooked nose. Stark silence reigned in the dungeon laboratory. Harry didn't move, not even to gauge Ron's expression. Such movement could probably set the potions master off, and the sixth year Paradors would have detention until they passed their N.E.W.T.s. Snape was exactly the type of professor to invent this punishment. "What," he fumed, "is the meaning of this?"

No one moved to respond to Snape. Harry greatly wanted to burst out in laughter, but his brain swiftly beat that impulse down. Only Jace looked close to falling over with hilarity, and Harry thought he was entitled. A slimy rope of gillyweed lurched down the front of Snape's robes. Apparently, this feat set him off.

"ANSWER ME!" He bellowed. Harry barely flinched at the deafening tone, his heart sinking. Even under the viscous gunk, Snape looked deadlier than usual. Gryffindor was sure to be drowning in the negative for the next decade or so. The professor's dark gaze deepened as they landed on his godson. Harry eyed Snape baring his yellow teeth, prepared to strike.

But lo and behold, someone had the daring to disrupt to the incensed potions master.

"Oops."

A Gryffindor. No surprise there, Harry mused.

Every eye turned to the back of the room, searching for that most unabashed voice. The brazen voice that did not even attempt an apology. Harry slowly turned in his stool, seeking that bold Gryffindor. His mouth fell open then.



Harry's eyes widened in horror at the least likely person he would have guessed. The Potions professor fumed, his black eyes shamelessly carving into his godson's, before cutting into the bold perpetrator's direction. Snape's expression curdled.

"Detention, Ms. Burton." He icily stated. "Get out."

Harry continued to blink owlishly at the red-haired witch, looking ever as ready to shatter another container in a heartbeat. The Being on the other side of Ron grimaced rather audibly and gingerly gripped his mouth, his normal-hued eyes locked on Ella.

Slowly, the witch gathered her belongings and calmly left the dungeon classroom. Harry thought he saw her grin smugly right before the door thumped shut.

Jace emitted a disbelieving snort and moved to the board with chalk in hand. Snape leveled him with glare, and stalked into his office, slamming the door hard behind him. "All right, back in your seats. It was just a bit of glass." He ordered the outraged Averins. The chalk screeched on the board with every letter. "While Professor Snape changes into something more than likely black and billowing, we'll begin brewing Draught of the Living Death...."

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The sixth years were the loudest out of all the years in the corridors. Word of Ella's humiliation of Snape spread like wildfire. Everyone stopped by the witch during lunch to pat her on the back in admiration or stare in awe. Of course, the Averins sent her death glares, but she didn't seem to mind.

Ron continued to talk and boast about it as if he'd done the deed himself. He bragged in vibrant tones all through the morning's classes so much that Harry and Hermione left him to his own devices. The Paradors were holding the witch in high esteem, clapping earnestly every time they passed her by. Only Hermione appeared unhappy with her actions.

"She dumped crucial ingredients on a teacher!" She hissed in scandalized tones. "How is that supposed to be praised?" Harry wanted to tell Hermione he didn't even believe the witch smashed the tub of gillyweed, that she took the blame for someone else.

But instead, he shrugged, squeezing through two lanky seventh years. Hermione was walking faster than usual. "Because it's Snape. How many of us have wanted to do that since day one?"

Hermione huffed, clutching her books tightly to her chest. "She wasn't even sorry."

"I wouldn't be, either." Harry countered. "And face it, neither would Ron, nor you — "

"I would!" She shrieked appallingly. "I completely would!" Harry's brow furrowed.

"Of course you wouldn't."

Hermione's lips thinned. "Just because I'm not a barbarian, like you boys — "

Harry shook his head, a smile brimming on his lips. "You wouldn't."

The older witch scoffed, moving hurriedly through the hordes of students to get to her Ancient Runes lesson. She was still slightly scarlet, whether it was from the brisk pace or her anger, Harry wasn't sure. In the sudden stint in conversation, Harry noticed she gave him uneasy looks. After her fifth glance, she cleared her throat. "There's something I need to tell you."

Harry nodded, starting to fumble through his bag to make sure he had last night's Divination homework. "Mm-hmm. Is it about the Bellotaur?" He asked.

"No."

He smirked into his folder. "Are you finally admitting that you wouldn't be sorry to hex Snape?"

She sounded frustrated. "No." Harry distractedly nodded as he tucked spare parchment away. "I've been asked to Hogsmeade." Hermione's voice was quiet, almost muffled, but Harry heard her.

"Oh?" He stopped rummaging through his sack.

She nodded, her cheeks violently pink. After a pause, she elaborated, "By Ron."

Harry absently nodded. "Okay."

The prefect suddenly slowed her pace and gave Harry a timid look. "Are you all right with this?" Harry shrugged, his brows lowering with incomprehension.

"You know I am. We always go to Hogsmeade together." He knew they had no idea he would be speaking to Sirius this weekend, but he had a weird feeling Sirius would want to talk with him alone.

He was perplexed by Hermione's flabbergasted expression as they rounded a corner and were separated by Hufflebores. She paused for a considerable amount of time before, "Yes, I know. But Ron and I are going to Hogsmeade." She emphasized.

Harry nodded, unmoved. "Uh-huh."

Hermione sighed deeply. "With each other."

"Oh."

The witch made a noise of slight exasperation before she expanded, "The two of us."

Realization finally dawned on the seeker. "Oh." He didn't see that coming. Hermione's pace suddenly quickened again, and Harry hurried to keep in step. "Well, that's g...nice." He coughed to keep from frowning.

She hummed nervously. "You want to come along?"

"No, you and Ron will do. I'll have something else." He carelessly stated. Hermione looked up with a skeptical expression.

"You're furious, aren't you?" She fretfully repined. "It's completely uncalled for, me accepting without consulting you. I'll just cancel — "

"No," Harry contradicted somewhat halfheartedly. "Don't cancel. You and Ron have your own lives. You should go to Hogsmeade. With him. I'll...yeah."

Hermione paused, clearly unconvinced. "Harry," she began tentatively, "Are you sure?" Harry started in the opposite direction, toward the lower staircases.

"Yeah," he raised his voice over the garish fifth years. "We'll meet up for a butterbeer, good and well?" Harry nodded to himself, and turned away after Hermione embraced his suggestion. He couldn't say he didn't expect this, what with Ron's behavior aggressive towards Boot and the entire Viktor Krum issue. The Gryffindor trudged to his next class, deep in thought.

He would not have realized he carried himself all the way to the Divination classroom if it hadn't been for the enveloping darkness and the grass beneath his trainers. The forest span had few students, already on their backs, stargazing. It would be good to mull over this over before —

"Harry!"

Unfortunately, Ron was already propped against a tree, scratching in his last answers. Harry presented him with a flat smile when the prefect caught his advance. "Wondering when you'd get here, mate." He clumsily budged over to make room next to a large rock. Harry stiffly sat beside him, pulling out his homework as a reflex action. "You missed it in the Great Hall," the redhead carried on, jotting away.

"Oh?" Harry attempted to sound vaguely interested.

"Yeah, Seamus and Yorick..." Ron started to spout some nonsense about the day's Potions incident reenacted, but Harry wasn't listening. Sliding on his back, Harry stared at the glittering night sky, his eyes narrowing. It would all end up how he wanted it, right? He'd meet Sirius while Hermione and Ron would be frolicking around Hogsmeade doing goodness knows what.

He did keep Sirius' visit a secret; he didn't really want his friends to intrude. Lord knows they've always slunk in the background when he discussed general information with his godfather. He didn't feel like fighting with Hermione in the common room afterward, as she always criticized Sirius' actions.

This was his chance to finally get away: Hermione and Ron need not come along, and Harry was well certain he didn't want them there. His forehead wrinkled and an uncomfortable frost settled in his stomach. He certainly didn't need Ron and Hermione hanging over his shoulder this weekend. They would have their own time, and he would have his. It was only fair he kept them in the dark.

But why did he feel so awful about it?

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Harry shoved his Invisibility Cloak in his pocket and left the dormitory. Ron and Hermione weren't in the common room, but he hardly attempted to look for them. He stuffed the note sent by Sirius earlier in the week into his pocket and headed for the entrance hall.

He nodded to Dean, wrapped around some Brittlebore, on his way out of the castle, and lightly swathed his scarf around his neck in the chilled breeze. Filch growled at him as Harry passed by the late weekend breakfast in the Great Hall. By the time he reached Hogsmeade, Harry's ankles were freezing. Cursing the snow, Harry lumbered up the high road only to freeze in his tracks.

Aurors congregated in the small wizarding village, their faces flinty and their wands at their sides. Many stopped various residents and shoved small pieces of parchment in their faces, letting them on their way after a few whispered words. Harry knew from the Daily Prophet the law enforcement officials were now stationed in Hogsmeade, but he didn't think they would need this large number.

Through the swarm of Aurors and Hogwarts students, Harry spotted a familiar looking bald head not too far from him. Face set in determination, Harry shoved past pairs of students and made his way toward the Auror. The wizard had already turned and his eyes came to rest on the advancing Gryffindor. "Kingsley."

"All right, Harry?" The black Auror boomed, his fists crossing his chest.

"Brilliant," Harry hastily replied. "What's going on?" He gestured to a few drawn-faced wizards. "There are Aurors everywhere. Is something wrong?"

Kingsley frowned, as if he wasn't going to answer. Then he dipped a large hand in his robes and produced a small square of paper, showing it to Harry, who frowned. It was a small picture of a younger Sirius, his eyes angry and menacing. "The department received an anonymous tip that Sirius Black would be in Hogsmeade today." His dark eyes glittered, and Harry's chest tightened.

"I thought you'd given up on the search?"

The Auror tucked the photo away. "Minister Scrimgeour wants to tie up all prior loose ends during his term." Harry seethed at the thought of his godfather being a 'loose end'. He didn't like this Scrimgeour one bit.

He ran the words over and over in his head as his breathing faintly quickened. "An anonymous tip?" He caught on, his eyes fierce. "From who?"

The older wizard gave the Gryffindor an admonishing smile after briefly scanning the crowds. "If we wanted you to know, it wouldn't be anonymous, now would it?" Harry released the tight breath trapped in his lungs. Kingsley inclined his head curtly at a passing colleague. "In any event, we don't know ourselves."

Clenching his fists, Harry glared. "How do you know it isn't some prank?"

Kingsley looked troubled before he continued. "The information was consistent with evidence we've already gathered." Harry's temple creased as the Auror looked away once again.

"Evidence? What kind—?" But Kingsley thumped him on the shoulder and headed up High Street, effectively ending the conversation.

"Squander easy, lad. The Aurors will make sure to handle any inconveniences with subtlety." And he walked off with a smirk.

Blinking, Harry shook his head and cursed all the way to Honeyduke's grabbing whatever sweet he passed. He realized he would regret this when he got back to the castle, as some of his purchases weren't what he normally bought, namely the blood-flavored lollipops.

But Harry was upset. Who tipped the Aurors off? He tossed in a box of Cockroach Clusters. Harry hadn't told a soul he was meeting Sirius, but did someone find out? Did one of the students read the note over his shoulder? He should have been more careful. Harry was irritated. Despite being in the center of everything, he still wasn't getting any answers.

Without much interest, Harry slipped in and out of Hogsmeade's shops purchasing very little. He even found less interest in Zonko's today. It wasn't much fun going by himself. And Harry did realize he was by himself. It wasn't hard.

Today's Hogsmeade weekend was scheduled, unfortunately, on Valentine's Day. It seemed everyone in Hogsmeade had a partner today. Everyone was holding hands, or attached at the hip or mouth; or like some of his classmates, they were with another friend, just spending the day together.

And Ron would be with Hermione.

Harry felt like an outsider. He was only glad he wouldn't have to go to Madam Puddifoot's. The place was probably packed on this occasion.

He left Dervish and Banges and nearly bumped into the wild-eyed Slytherin who had insulted Hermione after the D.A. meeting. The Slytherin scowled at him, and Harry glared right back, but noticed even he was with a knot of housemates.

Passing Gladrags, Harry spied Starbuck and Kaltag, standing idly in front of the shop. Both brothers smiled in greeting, Kaltag's metal gear having been removed a few days ago. "It's Harry." He brightly stated. "Harry's here."

The seeker lifted a brow. "What, were you waiting for me?"

"No, but here you are." Starbuck snorted and shook his wavy head.

"What are you doing here?" Harry questioned, looking around their area. "Came together?"

The Smythes grimaced. "The girls are in the shop, perusing the shelves. We'd much rather freeze in the snow." Harry's face fell slightly and he began to fumble around in his Honeyduke's sack. Even they were with someone.

Kaltag nodded enthusiastically. "I don't mind all that much." The redhead thrust his hands in his pockets, turning to inspect the window. "It's hard finding someone to date."

"Yeah," Starbuck resumed impassively. "As every other girl on Olympus is either your cousin or your sister."

Harry's eyes widened and he paused with Bertie Bott's in hand. "Seriously?"

The boys released identical snorts. "It's a nightmare."

Harry's head slanted interestedly to the side. "So, Endymion...?" He let the query hang in the air.

The elder Being cagily lowered his eyes. "Great grand aunt or cousin, I think." Harry's face contorted and he offered them an Every Flavor Bean. "She's of Titan blood." His tutor recommenced after gnawing on a green bean. "Still sort of unpleasant, the thought, but inbreeding is normal, right?" Harry could only guess the look on his face was one of disbelieving appall.

Kaltag shrugged, looking self-conscious. "Guess not."

The tinkling of the shop's bell ended their silent feasting. Harry watched in amusement as a wistful grin brightened the redhead's face. Harry could only guess he was waiting for his companion—Ella—to finish her shopping. He looked like he was about to break his jaw again from smiling so hard. The witch grinned at him and turned the smile on Harry. "Hello there, Harry."

She helped herself to some of his candy. Harry nodded and popped in an Every Flavor bean. He quickly spat it back out: pocket lint.

"Where's—?"

"Circe's still in there, fighting off a few admirers." She disrupted the blonde's inquiry. Starbuck did not wait for another statement and



marched into the small shop, looking annoyed. Kaltag's smile widened.

"Find anything?"

Harry observed the witch shake her head, her face lighting up. "Let's go to Puddifoot's!" Harry nearly gagged when the Being's grin waned.

He now looked sick. "Good Lord, you're not serious, are you?" Her upbeat expression morphed into a glower of rebuke that reminded Harry strongly of Ginny. "I-I mean, you're not serious," the Celestial hesitated, looking to Harry for support. "I was thinking the, uh...exact same thing...!" His laugh was forced. "What a — "

"Travesty." Harry murmured under breath.

"Coincidence." The prefect frothed, shooting a glare in Harry's direction. The Gryffindor couldn't help but bite his lip to stem a chuckle. Ella looked disbelieving, but dragged the Celestial by the arm anyway.

"Goodbye, Harry. Say hello to Hermione and Ron for me." The enigmatic witch smiled, towing a very reluctant companion to Puddifoot's café.

Harry shuffled to push his half-eaten box of jellybeans away. "Right." He muttered into his shopping bag. "If I see them." He had no sooner shoved the box of beans into his bag when he ran straight into someone. Stumbling back, Harry muttered an apology to the blonde person and paused when he locked gazes with inquisitive, bulging eyes. "Luna," he greeted unexpectedly. "Sorry about that."

The Ravenclaw angled her head to the side, hardly noticing his presence. "How odd," she absently stated. She wasn't looking at him, but at the confectionary. "Someone told me the sweetshop was closed down due to a rodent infestation. Hm. I thought it might've been the Gray-Banded Snobblefloat." She nodded self-assuredly. "It favors abandoned areas where the air is sweet."

Frowning, Harry fathomed a few students were probably playing a prank, making fun of the eccentric fifth year. "They must've rid the store of it. It's open." He nodded his head, clutching his sweets sack

close. Luna's silvery gray eyes narrowed under her pale brows, and she adjusted the wand behind her ear. A number of Ravenclaws witches glided by, assessing Luna with judgmental stares and stifled their titters, in turn making the Gryffindor upset.

Mouth fixed and green eyes narrowed, Harry raised his chin. "D'you want to hang about Hogsmeade with me today?" He announced loud enough, earning ogling gapes from the passing witches. Their eyes rocketed to his forehead for confirmation. Luna considered him with an unusual look.

"What about your friends, Ronald and Hermione?"

Harry shrugged. "They'll understand." He vaguely elaborated. "Come on." He gently grabbed her elbow and tugged her toward the entrance. "You can tell me more about the snobblefloat...." Luna's eyes lit up before she went on a tangent, and they happily left the gaggle of girls behind.

After her spirited lecture, Harry and Luna walked into Honeyduke's, elbow to elbow with their peers. Harry acknowledged a few of his year mates and their companions with simple nods while Luna inspected the Jelly Slugs.

It was as Luna wandered off toward the front; Harry noticed many of the departing students were strolling away from the Three Broomsticks and toward a more unpleasantly familiar area. His heart dropped along with his content mood. Sulking back to Luna, Harry suddenly felt uneasy and nervous. The last time he'd been there, his date was a complete disaster. But Luna was a girl....

Swallowing uneasily, Harry paused beside the oddball Ravenclaw. "Harry," she airily greeted. "Mr. Honeyduke tells me there wasn't a snobblefloat problem." She tapped her chin in deep thought. "I think they might've had a displaced hauge loose...."

"Erm...Luna?" Harry clutched his bag for reassurance. Luna watched him intently. "I'd wager, considering," he gestured awkwardly between the two of them, "You'd want to head to Madam Puddifoot's?" He tried very much to keep the dejection from his voice, but he sounded more morose than when Hagrid gave Norbert away.

Luna pierced him with an expression of disinclination before — thankfully — shaking her head. "Oh, I would never go in there." Harry would have grabbed and embraced her in appreciation but resigned himself to a relieved sigh. "I believe it's haunted by breeding beetlewort cacao demons."

Nodding awkwardly, Harry accompanied Luna outside. "I thought so, yeah." Her eyes lit up with approval. Both the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw disregarded the astonished stares and rapid whispers of Hogwarts students as they trudged in and out of the shops on High Street.

Harry found Luna to be a quite enjoyable companion, their conversations ranging from the normal to the abnormal — not that Harry minded. Luna kept his mind off of the state of things, and for that he was grateful. They shared drinks at the Three Broomsticks, chatting about The Quibbler and whatever theory or information Luna concocted. Luna wasn't so bad; strange, yes, but rightly so.

At one point, Harry had to stop Luna from revealing what the 'most unpleasant but absolutely fascinating' ingredients of butterbeer consisted of. He really wanted to enjoy the drink on subsequent Hogsmeade weekends. Harry had a suspicion what Luna almost enlightened would've impacted him negatively. He didn't want to cause a scene by spewing the two bottles he already consumed in the midst of the tavern.

Luckily, Luna pulled out a rather thick copy of The Quibbler, as he was about to leave for his meeting. "We should do this again sometime." He smiled, standing from his seat. He was somewhat surprised to find he really meant it. "Are you sure you'll be all right here?"

Luna didn't look up from her reading. "Wonderful." She vaguely responded. "I promised Ginny she could read this edition first. She's supposed to be here with a boy from Hufflepuff." Harry grunted a response and bade farewell. He needed to get to the mountain's edge in less than an hour.

He pressed through a crowd of nearly intoxicated wizards and left the pub, checking that his invisibility cloak was still in his back pocket. He hadn't taken three steps away from the door before his way was blocked. Harry's eyes first noticed the bushy hair.

"Harry!" Ron greeted genially. Harry briskly returned the greeting and stepped onto the main road, waiting for a carriage to pass. "We've been looking for you all day. Aurors everywhere! It's quite crowded today."

At the mention of Aurors, Harry's face contorted with ire. "They're looking for Sirius." Ron and Hermione's eyes widened. "Kingsley told me. I think someone is playing a prank."

"A very elaborate one." Hermione whispered as an Auror tipped his hat to her.

"Quite." Harry shortly replied, quick to change the subject. "I had an pleasant walk around the village." Hermione nodded quickly, and her laugh was unnatural.

"Oh, yes," she toiled. "We've had a very...enjoyable walk, too..." He'd only eyed their faces for a few seconds, but judging by their identical flat expressions, it seemed they were on a dreadful guided tour rather than an 'enjoyable walk.' Harry noticed — with some amusement — they were far apart: very unlike the fawning behavior of the others around them. Ron gave Hermione odd looks, who barely looked in his direction at all.

The younger wizard smirked. "Right." He started to walk up the road.

"Where are you going?" Ron nosed, his long strides keeping up easily. "And have you seen Ginny or who she was with?" Harry shook his head.

"I heard she was with a Hufflepuff. Maybe Macmillan."

Ron made a sound of incredulity. "That twit?"

"Ron!" Hermione butt in. "That is not polite!"

The Quidditch keeper quietly grumbled, "Well he is," and pulled a face. They followed the black-haired wizard in silence before he spotted Hermione's affected smile again. She was using it quite a bit, he realized.

"Want to go to the Three Broomsticks?" She offered. Harry declined. "How about Honeyduke's?" She tried again. Harry held up his sack bursting with candy.

"Already been." Ron stared at the bag with longing.

There was quite a pause before Hermione hastily burst out, "Zonko's?" Harry nearly faltered in his step. Hermione rarely ever went into Zonko's. When she did, she would always loom over them and scold them on how foolish and immature they were.

Harry lowered his brows suspiciously as Ron finally looked at Hermione with astonishment. "Not today, thanks." He turned down.

"Since when do you go to Zonko's?" the red-haired prefect queried.

"Are you sure?" Hermione fished. "We can get those dungbombs and — and those stink pellets and — "

"I'm fine, Hermione." She fidgeted with her scarf and chewed on her lip.

Ron seemed oblivious to Hermione's motives. "You want to go to Zonko's?" he repeated.

Hermione hesitantly replied, "N — yes. Yes, I would." Her answer was just as strained as her smile. Harry knew exactly what she was up to. "Harry, are you sure?" The look she threw him was pleading. "At least we can go to Rosmerta's for butterbeer."

Harry sighed roughly, refusing once again. "No, I already had butterbeer with — someone." He evaded. Hermione's desperate look swiftly faded into one of interest.

"Oh?" Harry didn't like her intrusive pitch. "Who?"

He curtly repeated, "Someone."

"Do we know her?"

"Sure, but I need to meet somebody."

Ron at last reentered their level of conversation. "Wait, you've got a girlfriend?" The two prefects paused in the snow together, Ron with a look of disbelief and Hermione with a funny gleam in her eyes. Ron's temple furrowed and he moped, "I want to come."

"No, Ron," Hermione tugged his arm to hold him back; she suddenly seemed much happier. "They want to be alone. After all, who are we to interfere with Harry's love life?" Harry subdued a grimace at that comment. Ron whined in objection as Hermione waved him off. "Have fun, Harry." She joshed with a smirk as they headed back to the Three Broomsticks.

Sighing with relief, Harry headed toward the back of Hogsmeade, pausing to look at the progress of Fred and George's new shop when professors or Aurors passed. He was relieved to make it safely to the end of the road with minimal fuss, and as he put distance between himself and Dervish and Banges, he threw on his cloak.

His return post from Sirius shortly notified him to meet at the stile at the end of the road. Harry moved quickly toward the end of the village, roaming the winding lane and hazily observing the fewer number of cottages and larger gardens he last spotted in his fourth year. The mountain looked somewhat smaller, but Harry ascribed it to the reality that he was much taller now. Turning the corner, he spied the stile at the end of the lane, and lying near it, a bear-like hound with its ears erect.

Harry pulled off his cloak and stuffed it in his back pocket. Sirius sprang up on all fours and began to trot up the mountain. They walked through rock and snow for nearly a half hour until the dog slipped through the narrow fissure in the mountain. Harry gratefully followed and tightened his scarf; being winter, the cave was much cooler.

His eyes roving the familiar cave, Harry spotted a large blur, half-eagle, half horse, its beak sifting through a pile of bones. On the floor beside it were yellowed Prophets from nearly two years ago. "Good to see you, Harry." Sirius slapped him on the shoulder, gripping it rather tightly. He had a mischievous gleam in his eye Harry didn't like at all. "I didn't pull you from anything special in Hogsmeade, did I?"

The Gryffindor exhaled brusquely. "No, you did not." He punctuated. Sirius released a short whoop of laughter.

"Were you with anyone?"

Harry turned away to bow at Buckbeak. The hippogriff stopped rifling through scraps to inquiringly return the respect. Harry stooped to pat him gently on his neck. "Hardly romantic. Hogsmeade is loaded with Aurors."

"I know."

Harry raised a brow. "That they're looking for you?" He looked over his shoulder at his godfather's puzzled guise. "Apparently not." Buckbeak squalled in agreement.

"That's funny," Sirius cupped his chin pensively. "Thought I only told Remus at breakfast that I'd be here." Harry scratched the last of Buckbeak's feathers before he stood and held out his bag of sweets to Sirius.

"I have too much as it is." The Animagus shot him a gratified look and rummaged through the bag.

Sirius pulled out the Every Flavor Beans and popped the carton open. "Where are Ron and Hermione?"

Another frown blemished the seeker's face. "Necking in Hogsmeade, I'd imagine." He scornfully answered. The convict's shaggy brows soared toward his hairline.

"Really? That serious?" Stated Sirius.

Harry heaved a guilty sigh. "Well, no. But they went together."

"Are you all right with that?"

He quickly replied, "I am." Sirius appeared anything but convinced. Harry remained silent for a moment, mulling over his response before, "I think. I mean I — it was bound to happen, right?" Sirius motioned for him to sit on a small stone he hadn't noticed before now.

Sirius slumped amusedly against the wall and waved, "Go on."

A sigh erupted unbidden from Harry's lungs. "With the way Ron's been acting about Krum and then, when Hermione was studying with this Ravenclaw, and they argue about everything." The godfather nodded as Harry's face scrunched, "And even Starbuck at the beginning of last term. I suppose it was always there, but I can see it all now."

The Animagus nodded, his grayish eyes glinting. "And what about you?"

Harry frowned. "Not really. Since last year, there really hasn't been anyone. Although I did spend the day with Luna — "

"Luna?" Sirius stretched out her name with curiosity. He chuckled at Harry's glare.

"Luna Lovegood. Her father runs The Quibbler." A noise of enlightenment emitted from Sirius. "But we went as friends. I did it mostly to shut her housemates up. They're very rude." Sirius blanched somewhat.

"Slytherin?"

"Ravenclaw." The convict sighed with ease. "Everyone was paired in Hogsmeade. It's rather nauseating." This earned a quiet snigger from the gaunt wizard. Harry's expression warped resentfully in Buckbeak's corner. "But it is Valentine's Day."

When Sirius remained utterly silent for a span, Harry's eyes strayed in his direction. His eyes widened as he noted Sirius' somber look and darkened eyes. He looked much older and shadowed than he was, as if he'd never left Azkaban prison. Harry cautiously stirred, "Sirius?"

The wizard didn't even look in his direction but began to speak. "Valentine's Day," his tone was far away, and his gaze even farther. "Always Valentine's Day." Harry wrapped his robe closely around his arms; the cavern seemed to drop in temperature. Buckbeak even paused his ferreting.



"I always teased your father about his infatuation with Valentine's Day. He planned pranks for February fourteenth, especially on the girls. Your mother in particular, Harry." Said student tensed at the new information. "That was mainly why she couldn't stand him. His practical jokes and merciless teasing of certain people. But he was always a bit of a sap," Sirius rumbled with laughter. "Tried to assure us there was "no significance" with the holiday. Never believed him, anyway.

"But your father — such a sap," there was no teasing behind his words, "mainly pranked them for attention."

"My mother." Harry rasped. He hadn't realized his mouth was as dry as cotton. Sirius tossed him the bag of sweets and swallowed a handful of Beans.

"Yes, Lily. She hated him. You remember that fifth year memory?" Harry sullenly nodded. "She couldn't stand his showboating. But James was quite the charmer. Made it up to her in our sixth year. Voldemort was gathering followers, and of course they teased your mother for being a Muggleborn. It went on every day, non-stop, mostly because she was the top of our class. James didn't like when someone else was harassing others; he believed that job was reserved for himself only."

Harry gave a short, amused laugh. Sirius eyes flickered in reminiscence. "So, he set aside his mischief and offered her comfort — she still hated him, of course. But you can guess what happened — they succumbed to the influence of Valentine's Day sixth year." The confection Harry swallowed felt a lot lumpier in his throat. What if Ron and Hermione...? He swallowed thickly.

"The rest of our years for us — Remus, Pettigrew," he spat out the name, "And I had to skirt around Lily to do our pranks. She became Head Girl, after all. Even though your father became Head Boy, he was a Marauder first and foremost." He proudly beamed as Harry bit into a Chocolate Frog. As quickly as the Animagus' beam appeared, it receded into a closed look. "But Valentine's Day. A holiday both kind and cruel to your parents." The hippogriff crunched the last of his bones and took to shredding the newspaper.

Sirius moved slowly to the entrance of the cave, his arms folded and his gray-blue orbs distant. Harry noticed the light dusting of snow

falling as he delved into thought. He appreciated Sirius coming all the way out here to tell him about his parents, really, but what was the purpose of this? The man almost seemed sad and obligated to tell him this. Harry believed it probably weighed heavily on him to speak about his deceased friends. The older wizard remained silent for a little while longer before he spoke again.

"Valentine's Day was a bittersweet day for your parents. It was a day James unfailingly played jokes on Lily, it was their first date; the day of James' marriage proposal in seventh year, and..." He smiled briefly before his countenance fell ominously. Harry's eyes narrowed. "...And a day of loss."

Loss? This caught Harry's attention. "What do you mean?" Sirius gave a rattling exhale, as if he was in pain. Harry's heartbeat quickened. He somehow knew he wasn't going to like this. "Sirius?" he prompted.

"It's time you know the truth, Harry." He had a strangled tone to his voice. Harry slowly stood to his feet.

A dull burn began to spread across his chest. "The truth?" He whispered. His heart felt lodged in his throat.

Sirius emitted a sigh that could cut through glass. "Harry," the boy never heard his godfather sound so broken. Worry stabbed through Harry like a knife. Sirius still dared not look at him when his next words doused Harry in ice water.

"You weren't the first child Lily and James had."

oooooooooooo

A/N: I'm sure you all hate me right now. Is it too much to ask for a little support? Please review!

A/N 2: If you want to know how the next chapter is progressing, check out the MoonFruit link on my profile.

## Chapter Twenty-Five: Skeletons

The half-eaten chocolate slapped onto the cave floor. Harry's heart twisted painfully. Surely...surely he couldn't've heard Sirius right. Swallowing around the obscene lump in his throat, Harry managed a weak, "what?"

Sirius stubbornly refused to look in his direction, but Harry could almost feel the expression of defeat he gave off. "You," the elder wizard paused to collect himself, "were not the first child of your parents."

Harry absently slumped against the wall. His eyes were wide, and suddenly, he was overcome with a slight tremble. "What — "

"Dead." Sirius' expressionless tone answered. Dead? Harry felt the numbness recede somewhat.

"How —?"

Sirius' voice hardened. "Voldemort wasn't above killing children. Probably thought it was best to take out the enemy while at risk—or in this case, pregnant."

His godfather sighed heavily, turning to face him. His eyes never met Harry's. "But St. Mungo's officially ruled it as 'combustive miscarriage due to fetal-maternal barrier failure'. Rubbish." Harry's brow furrowed in confusion. Sirius' eyes finally met his, as they stood silent in thought. Again, the Animagus sighed, taking a few steps toward his pensive godson. "I suppose they haven't taught you this yet." He gestured to the stone behind the student. Reluctantly, Harry took a seat.

"Magical miscarriages have the potential to be more disastrous than Muggle ones. The baby destroys itself, Harry," the student narrowed his eyes, staring at his godfather in alarm, "and many believe it is magic's effort to protect the witch. It destroys itself bearing no trace of there having ever been a pregnancy." Both their brows wrinkled at his words. "The Healers diagnose it as womb implosion: Its magic causes it to implode, but though the fetus' magic does this for protection, it can cause damaging results.

"You see, the child develops in it's own magical cocoon of sorts protecting itself from harm at the possibility of danger. If both the mother and child have a substantial amount of magic, the womb has a chance of being protected. But there is always the same risk of both powerful and weaker magicks, where the miscarriage leaves the witch barren. Luckily, your mother was all right enough to have you." Sirius momentarily grinned. "But, I'm getting ahead of myself."

The Animagus stared out the bright cave entrance. Harry looked to his abandoned bag of sweets absently before Sirius finally continued. "Fresh out of Hogwarts, your parents were already engaged. Now, Lily had a job lined up at the Ministry for her: the Committee of Experimental Charms."

Harry's brow furrowed. "I thought my dad had inherited — "

" — A great sum of money, yes, he did," Sirius nodded in remembrance. "Enough that all three of you would've been well off long after you left Hogwarts. Can you find a reason why she would take a job?" The student looked away, deep in thought. He'd always been told his mother was good at Charms and school in general. He said as much.

"Mum was real good at Charms, right?" Sirius nodded slowly.

"Lily was first and foremost a Muggleborn, and was raised on the Muggle values of work and earn. She wasn't one for the laze-about lifestyle. Your mother loathed the stereotypes: women stay home, make children, and clean the house, while the men grunt and toil. She nearly hexed James when he suggested that." Harry smiled at the thought. "Your mother wanted to do something, further herself. So, she took a job at the Ministry and dragged your father into it."

Harry smirked. "He wasn't happy, was he?"

The Animagus' chest rumbled with laughter. "No, no he wasn't. But he worked if only to appease your mother. He was lucky there was an opening at the Department of Magical Accidents. He wasn't needed often, as he was a newcomer, but the fact was Lily was happy. And all that mattered was Lily's happiness."

To Harry, Sirius made it sound as if James was some lovesick fool. Who'd base their whole life around one person? Harry frowned deeply as it dawned . . . oh. Voldemort. Right.

"Your mother was quite happy, and your father worked to please her. Their only major mission together was the aftermath of a Death Eater raid at the Magus Foundation in Origen Alley. It affected Lily a great deal; must've been all the destroyed priceless artifacts, but she wouldn't talk about it. At any rate, right after that she found out she was pregnant." Sirius paused for a moment and Harry drooped in his seat. Buckbeak blinked owlishly at them before pecking at his wings again.

"Lily was very protective of the child," he went on airily, as if mentioning a long forgotten object. "She always did what was best for the baby. The symptoms nearly killed your father. He was acting quite funny: a bit of sick, with aches and pains. Some days Remus and I believed Lily hexed him with a Mimic Jinx. But the new year came, and we all worked hard to thwart Voldemort. And then something odd happened." The younger Gryffindor sat up, straightening as Sirius took on a curious pitch once more.

"What?"

Sirius' brow wrinkled in perplexed musing. "I'm not sure. Dumbledore told James and Lily something, something important. After that, they told us they had to go into hiding. He never told us what, though. But it had to be momentous if they were to be forced into hiding."

Harry's expression emptied in realization. The prophecy, of course. Dumbledore must've got the prophecy early that year from Trelawney and told his parents! "Lily and James had to go immediately, but they weren't sure if they were going to see us again. So we all went to Hogsmeade for drinks at Rosmerta's. We made sure to check with Dumbledore first. Unfortunately, one other person knew." Harry nodded at the insinuation.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Peter had told him," he spat with contempt. "Because the next thing we knew there was this great swell of magic that swept through the very foundations of Hogsmeade. I was surprised the entire pub hadn't come down around us. And then we heard it. Screaming from upstairs. Shouting, crying, yelling — things

that made your spine tingle. James took off for the stairs and we all followed. I guess we should've seen it then," his gray eyes grew dim with hatred, "that Peter was delayed in following us. Made up some rubbish that we foolishly believed at the time. Your father broke through the door just as Voldemort and his companion Apparated out. Both women were tangled together on the floor and...and I'll never forget the look on Lily's face.

"And poor Athena, nearly six months along; she'd had to witness it all. Tried defending them, I expect. Lily'd brought her along as her faithful companion, because and I quote, "goodness knows I wouldn't be able to survive the night surrounded by wellied schoolboys!" Sirius' bark of laughter was short-lived as his thin face fell once more.

Harry swallowed thickly, the lump in his throat impossibly larger as Sirius described that night with vivid detail. He quickly looked away to the rest of the cave. "She was just...sobbing on the floor, gripping her middle. It was a few minutes before James saw what we didn't: Lily's stomach was slightly depressed. Much smaller than the five months she should have been. We could all feel it: her magic was lessened a great deal. She'd miscarried. The Healers later thought the means for the miscarriage was because of a dark magic spell Voldemort threw. The power was too much for both of them and the babe gave out. Your parents were distraught.

"Lily was depressed for a while, and James thought he'd cheer her up by finally getting married. Well, they did, and she was happy — for a while, until Athena gave birth. She sort of relapsed, spending insane amounts of time with the triplets and obsessing over them. At times we thought she was going spare: it couldn't've been healthy for her to be around the babies so soon after losing hers. Went on insisting the baby had survived. She was firm in her conviction for a while," the Animagus lowered his gaze, "but after many visits to the Smythes, she realized the truth. I guess she must've been set straight. Not long after that conversation, she became pregnant with you and they finally went into hiding." Harry nodded mutely, thinking.

At last, he broke the unnerving silence between them. "Why wouldn't Dumbledore tell me this?" His soft tone betrayed the deep irritation he felt with the headmaster.

Sirius thoughtfully frowned. "He probably didn't perceive it as relevant."

Harry seethed. "RELEVANT?"

"To this war," Sirius clarified to the echoes. "It'd probably just add more fuel to your fire. Believe me Harry, there's nothing I want more than to rip him apart for hurting James and Lily. But the last thing you need is to be overcome with rage and blinded by anger. You'd be letting Voldemort win." Harry's nostrils flared in anger. "What's more, I wouldn't want you hunting Voldemort by yourself."

Indignantly, Harry attempted to justify his rage. "I — I wouldn't do that." Sirius gave him a disbelieving grin. Peeved, the younger wizard opened his mouth before he was disrupted.

"Right, Harry."

He reared, snarling, "As if I'd — "

"Listen," the Animagus gruffly interrupted. "There's more."

Glaring at the rummaging hippogriff, Harry crossed his arms and shoved himself against the wall. "What now? Voldemort plan on running for undersecretary?" Harry muttered venomously.

Sirius went on as if he hadn't heard him. "Voldemort is planning an attack soon." Harry's annoyance dissipated.

"On Hogwarts? When?"

His godfather shook his head. "We're not sure. Near Hogwarts, perhaps. Keep a sharp eye out. But Harry I must warn you," grayish eyes bore into his. "The next time you see him, he may not look human."

Harry almost rolled his eyes at this. "The last time I saw him, he looked anything but human already."

Sirius nodded impatiently. "Yes, yes, I meant more so than normal. It's curious to others, but the right Celestials are suspicious." Sirius' forehead creased as he stood before the bemused boy. "Battalion

members have found several dead Hybrids near a butchery in Guildford."

The young wizard raised a brow. "And . . . this is bad, because . . . ?"

"They were all drained of blood and left in an area abundant with Muggles. Fortunately, few memories had to be modified." Harry ran a hand through his hair.

"What is that supposed to mean? Is it a message?" What were they trying to convey by killing some of the dark soldiers of Olympus? Scaring Muggles was always a treat of the Death Eaters, yes, but saddling them with rotting creatures?

"There is only one use for Hybrid blood." The older man went on, locking eyes with Harry. "And that is to increase both magical and physical strength. It's for a transformation, to alter oneself, mind, body . . . and soul." Harry's eyes narrowed. "Once you drink Hybrid life, your soul deteriorates into blackness. It makes the drinker nearly impervious; the mind is resilient, the body — stronger, and the soul even a Dementor wouldn't touch. Mystikos has been indulging himself for years; now, he may be sharing the wealth. We believe Voldemort is weaning himself on Hybrid blood."

As Sirius kicked the neglected chocolate away from the hippogriff, Harry strayed into thought. Voldemort was drinking Hybrid blood? Was this a substitute for the Sorcerer's Stone and the weapons? Harry almost laughed at the thought: Voldemort was looking for more power to defeat him, and he hadn't even taken his N.E.W.T.s yet. And he was getting stronger? If he was gaining strength . . . Harry didn't want to think of the possibilities.

"Hybrid blood . . . destroys your soul." He repeated. "Won't that kill him though?"

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Sirius wryly stated. "He's already beyond evil. Hybrid wine will only serve to make him more dangerous."

"As if he needed a blacker soul." Harry grumbled in disgust. "Sirius, why are you telling me all of this? Shouldn't you be telling the Order?"



"I'm telling you." He hedged. "You need to know this." The younger wizard stood and flattened his robes.

"Is that it?" Sirius reluctantly nodded and shuffled forward, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Holding Harry's gaze with fierce determination, Sirius smiled slightly. "I think it's time you head back. I'll be leaving under the cover of night."

"I can stay until — "

"No, you'd best be on your way." Sirius patted his neck, searching his eyes. "Be good, Harry. Remember what I told you: Do not let your anger cloud your mind. What's past has passed and it is too far gone to be changed." Harry nodded, his mind still reeling over what Sirius had revealed. "I hope you know that I'm proud of you?" His voice mildly wavered when he spoke.

Harry shrugged, vaguely confused, and crouched to grab what was left of his sweets. "I guess." He mumbled, eyeing Sirius' somewhat gloomy expression. "Be careful."

The Animagus' tone was firmer. "I'll try. I'll see you again sometime." For a moment, Harry thought Sirius would lunge forward for a gripping hug, but the wizard simply squeezed his shoulder and stepped back. "Bye, Harry." The student waved with a slight smile and stepped into the still frosty, but slightly warmer atmosphere of outside.

Harry climbed down the mountain and threw on his invisibility cloak at the stile, setting down the road back to Hogsmeade. He felt somewhat numb inside after hearing about his mother's miscarriage. He wasn't bothered by not knowing his parents or the child, but still, they were his family. Anger swelled a fraction as he realized Dumbledore kept it from him. How could he keep something like that from him? Didn't he consider that he'd want to know about it?

He removed his cloak as he reached Hogsmeade village and trudged through the students back to the school. All the while, Harry thought about what Sirius had divulged. Voldemort had killed his parents' first child. Dumbledore told his parents about the prophecy

and sent them into hiding. Dumbledore kept all of this from him (he silently seethed at this and kicked at a mound of dirt and snow). Harry's lungs were beginning to burn from breathing so hard.

Voldemort was transforming himself into a monster . . . well, more of a monster than he was now. Harry sighed heavily and grumbled at the cursed life he had. He never stood a chance: dead sibling, dead parents, convicted godfather; and he was left to soak up the leftover bad luck. And with the prophecy . . . well his life was practically cursed the moment he was born.

He entered the common room in a foul mood and glared right back at the scowling Sliatycx captain as he ran to his dormitory. Throwing his sweets on his bed, Harry grabbed whatever books his hands touched. When he grazed his photo album, Harry pushed it aside hastily and forced himself to do his work in the common room.

He needed to keep his mind off his parents and on Sirius' words of warning: what's past has passed and too far gone to be changed. There was nothing he could do about them, or the fact Voldemort was becoming stronger. Well, that wasn't true. Maybe he could find this ridiculous Child of Phoenix—Bellotaur, whatever it was and get this prophecy done and over with. With that firmly in mind, Harry set his quill to work on his essay for Herbology.

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Homework hadn't come along well by the time Hermione and Ron returned. Both looked rather red, be it from the chill outside or the heat of anger, Harry wasn't sure. By the glare Hermione was sending in Ron's direction, he'd presumed it was the latter. Before he could question them, Hermione burst out in inquiry.

"Were you with Luna? I heard someone in Scrivenshaft's talking about it."

Harry shrugged them off, foul mood simmering under the surface. "So what if I spent my weekend with her? I'm entitled to the same rights, aren't I?" He raised his brow menacingly and scratched his quill harder on the parchment. Apparently, Ron didn't get the warning in his tone.

"But, Harry . . . Loony Love —?"

"Shut it, Ron." Harry snapped, glaring at the startled prefects. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Harry sighed. It wasn't that he was mad at them . . . maybe Ron for his thickheadedness, but not entirely them. He was annoyed with everyone else. Voldemort. The Order. Dumbledore. Everyone involved with his parents at that time. Harry bottled his anger as best he could and leveled his gaze at Ron. "Do you have to call her that? It's rather immature."

Ron deflated at Harry's insistent look and his ears turned red. "Sorry. Old habits, you know?" Harry gave him a tight smile and turned his attention to Hermione.

"So, how was the thing in Hogsmeade?" Hermione's face fell and she made a noise of protest. Ron's expression went from uncomfortable to unpleasant in less time than it took a Firebolt to take flight.

"Uh, I think I still have to finish that chart for Divination." Ron muttered quickly and exited, sour look still in place. The remaining pair stared at his retreating back, with odd and fuming expressions on Harry and Hermione respectively.

"That good, huh?"

Hermione's expression darkened. "Oh, it went great. We had fun. All four of us."

" . . . Four?"

Hermione actually glared at Harry's open book. "Everything was perfectly fine until he invited Parvati and Mandy to join us for butterbeers!" She angrily fumbled with her scarf, nearly choking herself in the process. "He's acting all foolish around them making stupid jokes and they're making these disgusting doe-eyes and the idiot's falling for it! And then they join us for the rest of the visit and he's talking to them nonstop, like I'm not there! As if we weren't on a date!" Harry frowned.

"Um, was it a date? Or just — "

"It was a date!" Hermione insisted with harsh finality, furiously burying herself in his Herbology book. Harry went back to his essay and was careful not to bring the weekend up again.

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The following day, he got Ron's version of the 'date'. It was decidedly different than Hermione's account. "Lectures! That's all she went on about!" He hissed during Transfiguration. "The history of Dervish and Banges, the composition of jelly slugs, the oldest shop in Hogsmeade, this, that, the other — it was ridiculous! I felt more like I was in Binns' class than on a Hogsmeade weekend!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "What'd you expect? It's Hermione." He whispered, trying to animate his inkwell into an owl. Ron turned scarlet, glaring at his blinking inkpot.

"Yeah, but you'd think she'd realize by now the purpose of Hogsmeade weekends is to forget about school. Her brain probably never left the classroom!"

Harry snorted and received a dark look from McGonagall as she passed. "You think you'd realize by now Hermione will never forget about school." The redhead frowned, watching his half-inkwell, feathered invention squawk ink all over the table. "It couldn't've been that bad, though?"

"Oh, it was bad." Ron protested with a serious expression. "I had to grab Parvati just to make it slightly better."

"Hermione's not happy about that, you know." Harry softly pointed out as McGonagall warily swept by again.

Ron shrugged indifferently. "Her fault." Harry's gaze sought Hermione's inflexible form across the room, determinedly steering her goat around the table. The class was quite empty without Aripedes' students, as they had cleared out old, unused classrooms for practice exams. There was a definite panic about the Beings and Entities this week; the way they were going about it, it seemed as if the practice tests were more important than the exams themselves.

McGonagall shouted over the bell to assign three rolls of parchment to those that didn't succeed (Harry was quite pleased Malfoy and the

Serpents were unsuccessful, too) and sent them on their way. When Harry glanced up to wait for Hermione, she was already gone. He sighed, practically expecting that would happen since Ron was at his side. Somewhat put out by their childish strategies, Harry made the slow, cold trek to Herbology with Ron.

"I've been meaning to ask you," the prefect started after some time. "You seen anyone with Ginny at Hogsmeade? She won't say anything to me. I reckon she told the entire village to keep mum: no one's talking."

Harry tightened his scarf with a shrug. "I dunno, some redhead?" He guessed, having not seen the girl since Friday past. "Thought it was a Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, maybe Goldstein?"

But Ron wasn't listening; his brows were drawn together and the distinct wrinkle in his forehead meant he was thinking very hard. "Redhead, you say?"

"Sure." Answered Harry carelessly.

The keeper's face tensed in perplexity as they entered the greenhouse. "I got the most out of Orla, and she said she'd been round the entrance hall this morning."

Harry absently nodded. "Doesn't she have Hagrid first thing? The Celestials were doing their exercise with Lykaos in the forest this morning." Ron looked thoughtful as their conversation ended and they tugged on gloves, pairing up. A quick glance at the benches had him murmuring in slight recognition. "Hm, Moonsprawl."

Across the table, Hermione looked impressed. Ron's forehead furrowed. "What?"

"Oh, I saw this a few weeks ago with Kaltag. During..." he darted his eyes to the closely packed Hufflepuff and Ravenclaws. "Er...you-know-what. It's said to be very temperamental." Hermione nodded in approvingly.

"Ah," Ron frowned. "Don't tell me he's rubbing off on you. Next thing, you'd probably bore us to death with its history." Hermione did not look pleased with his cheek. "Grow it, then."

Harry buttoned his gloves and offered a confused, "Huh?"

The redhead impatiently motioned to the unsightly teal flower. "Grow it! Y'know, put those skills to good use: like getting us a high mark today!" He beamed. Across the table, Hermione made a distinct noise of protest.

"Ronald!" She scolded with a frown.

The prefect merely waved her off. "You could join too, Hermione, but then Ella..." he gave the unaware witch beside Hermione a sympathetic look. With a nonchalant gesture, she shook her head.

"Oh, no. I don't mind. Cheat away." Ron's victorious grin faded into a glare as Hermione scowled deeply, scooting away to sit by a Ravenclaw. Before he could snap at her, Professor Sprout emerged from the back entrance and called attention. With an angry huff at Hermione (who seemed to blatantly ignore him), Ron slumped in his seat. Rolling his eyes his friends, Harry perched on the table pretending to pay attention.

After a rather difficult lesson in which Harry cursed himself for not concentrating, the two cold and sticky wizards made a quick detour to the tower. "Who knew that thing sprouted fangs if poked too hard! And she could've told us to wear aprons, you know!" Ron seethed as they trudged through the portrait hole.

"I'm sure Professor Sprout mentioned it at some point." Harry stated absently, nursing his scratched fingers.

"Not Sprout: Hermione!" Ron growled as he flung a sticky gob of wax at the fire. "She deliberately didn't say anything! You see the look on her face when the plant went bonkers?"

The dark-haired wizard shook his head. "Nope."

"And she actually laughed with Boot when Sprout took points from us!" Harry popped a bleeding finger in his mouth.

"Actually, everyone laughed."

"We didn't deserve points taken away! We didn't do anything!"

Harry nodded pensively. "Well, that's true. You kept egging me on to cheat — which (thanks by the way) made the plant go mental — and asked me about practice forty times and were bragging about how little practice our team needed — "

"It's true!"

" — Because Ravenclaw needed all the pitch time they could get." A slight frown tugged on Harry's brow. "We really did do nothing. And you were quite obvious, really."

The redhead's brow furrowed. "Obvious?" Harry threw his bag down and tossed off his robes.

"Ron, it's not like Hermione'll be sitting in class with him waving a Ravenclaw flag. You're both being stupid."

The prefect's face turned remarkable shades of red as he spluttered, "I'm not! She is! Hard to believe, considering, but she is!"

"Kick it up a notch, Weasley; not like anyone's studying in here." A bothered tone softly reminded. Behind them, the history book was lowered a fraction and Harry spied surly blue eyes. On the table beside him sat a stack of schoolbooks piled haphazardly.

Harry glanced around and noted the Celestials were indeed trying to study. With a rueful look to the many glowers, Harry sunk into the couch. As he pulled out his wand to banish the wax from his fingers, he noted a moment of clarity sweep the keeper's gaze. Ron staunchly strode up to the prefect.

"Of course, you sneaky git! Was it you?" Sighing heavily, the Paraffin set his book down with a troubled look.

Harry stared between the two prefects. "Me what?"

"I knew it!" Ron accused, pumping his fist in the air with grim triumph. Harry shot his tutor a bewildered look that wasn't returned.

Rolling his eyes, Kaltag reopened his book distractedly. "Yeah, yeah, it was me." Again, Ron grunted in a blend of success and anger. "I'm the one who squeezed the house elf sweat in your pumpkin juice."

Guilty, milord." The Being paused to sniff at the pair with faraway eyes before returning to his reading.

Harry stifled a snort as Ron gagged and threw his sticky robe aside. "It was you! All along! Hiding behind every witch or Entity thrown your way!" Ron shook an accusing finger at the unmoved prefect.

In spite of himself, Kaltag looked up and smirked. "Oh! If you're talking about that thing with me and Turpin in the loo..." the Being chuckled wickedly, idly opening his book again. "Yeah, that's just hogwash. It was Brocklehurst in Firenze's classroom, actually..."

By now, Harry could tell from that shade of red alone, Ron was outraged. "So you're cheating on Ginny!"

"I'm what on who?"

As Ron was about to explode, the portrait hole swung open and a harassed-looking Icarus consulted Kaltag. "Oi, your highness! Pickwhiggy's at the door for you. He's having a fit, something 'bout failing Thetis' run-through. He's all scratching at the walls and talking to the lamps . . . " Both Beings released a perturbed sigh.

"Neurotic little psycho." He shook his head and rubbed his temples, sniffing the air. "Break out the tranquilizers, Ick . . . it's going to be a long afternoon." Kaltag shoved the thick text aside and made for the entrance, only to be stopped by Ron's shouting.

"Hang on! You never told me about Ginny!" Harry could almost feel the impatience rolling off the Celestial heir in waves.

Kaltag spun on his heel and glared at the Gryffindor. "There's nothing to tell! She pulled me from Weekends to ask a question!"

Harry eyed Ron, stiff with disbelief. "About?" He demanded.

Kaltag gripped his head in frustration. "Girl problems!" He spat. Both Harry and Ron reddened and paled respectively; Icarus laughed aloud. "Creatures — what else? I thought you'd like to know she's considering marrying a Manticore!" Harry muffled his snicker as Ron's face contorted in rage.



Outside the Fat Lady's painting, Harry heard distinct whining and hysterical babbling.

"Um, Tag? Pickwhiggy's . . . "

"Knock it off!" Was the angry bark as the sixth year slammed the portrait behind him. There was a lack of noise from the revising common room at large before they settled back to work. Ron glared daggers at the shadowed entryway, muttering a string of curses under breath. He grabbed his messy cloak and stalked to the dormitory steps with Harry close behind. The younger Gryffindor sucked his finger in his mouth as the Moonspawl sting gave a twinge again.

Ron tossed his robe on his four-poster and grabbed a loose one from the floor in anger, still grumbling to himself. Harry caught pieces of mutterings like, "who does he think he is" and "not making a fool out of me" and other considerably obscene mumbles. "You should probably lay off, Ron." Icarus startled both of them from beside his trunk. "He gets a bit . . . tetchy . . . this time of year."

The fuming boy bitterly laughed. "Are you sure it's just once a year?"

"Shoves everyone away, has got wild dreams, no sleep, irritable." Icarus headed out the door. "An all-out maniac, really."

"Isn't he irritable all the time?" Ron groused, following him out.

Harry shook his head at the loud and difficult morning so far. He hoped he made it to lunch without any more bad moods befouling him. But knowing his luck, he knew it was useless. With a weary sigh, he and Ron grabbed their bags and reluctantly rushed off to Defense.

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Over the next week, Harry found out exactly how far Kaltag's irritability extended. Besides Ron still throwing the prefect dirty looks, a few others were glaring at him. He noted Starbuck among that particular throng as the two expertly avoided each other. It also seemed everyone was tipped off early, as no conversation was directed to the Being, his nose since buried in countless books. The

most he'd said all morning was 'pass the milk' and that was slammed in front of him thanks to Starbuck's telekinesis.

When Seamus inquired about the still empty bowl of eggs, Harry overheard Neville quickly whisper the explanation. And the reason had to do with Starbuck, who in a fit of anger emptied the entire bowl on his plate. Luckily, Harry had got to it before he did; otherwise he'd just be having pumpkin juice for breakfast.

"You can have my plate," Dean offered the sullen Irish boy. "I think it's moving." The Paradors arrived at mealtimes early from then on, fearing the silent hostility would starve them to death if tardy.

Celestial testing continued, much to the Gryffindors' chagrin; Potions without Jace left Snape unusually gleeful. Several times Harry had botched a potion and came out of class more or less reeking of rotted onions.

Ron and Hermione were being quite ridiculous. Harry could be seen walking with one or the other in the corridors, but never both at the same time. Ron was still seething about Hermione's barefaced shrug off in Herbology and Hermione just ignored him altogether. The only time the three were seen in close proximity was a few days later writing up a Potions essay.

"How's he expect us to write four rolls on two sentences of information? Wishful thinking?" Ron griped as he tapped his quill. Hermione tiredly opened her mouth to speak, but shut it just as quickly. No doubt she found no use in explaining to Ron what 'research' meant.

Harry had become quite adept at letting their behavior and petty rants fall on deaf ears. Only when their squabble was affecting Ron's Quidditch prowess did he feel an urge to step in. The Gryffindor team had been practicing drills when Ron, who had let the ball slip in once all night, suddenly became horrible.

Harry, knowing someone just didn't become awful at goalkeeping ten seconds later, made to ask his co-captain the problem when he spotted it. Down in the Hufflepuff stands sat Terry Boot and Hermione, avidly conversing with books splayed open across their laps. He had seen his bushy-haired friend arrive with Ginny at the beginning of training, but he hadn't seen Boot's arrival. Much to

Ron's displeasure, the twosome shortly after left the stands together and made for the warm castle. Ron let the quaffle sail past him every attempt since then.

The only good thing out of the last few weeks was Hagrid's return. Seeing the half-giant's amiable face, Ron and Hermione temporarily set aside their bickering at least for his sake. As soon as class was over, they went back to their old ways. Harry had taken up walking with Neville instead of choosing between the two. At least Neville had something on his mind other than "sodding Boot!" and "it was a date, a troll would've known that!", even if it was plants.

The rest of February passed fairly quickly. Classes settled back to normal as Celestial practice ended: By the looks of the quite disheveled and worn-out Paraffins, not a moment too soon. Harry had heard quite a few students were laid up in the hospital due to the strain of practice tests and the nearing of the N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s for the conventional students. He was starting to feel the pressure of readings and essays when the professors began to shorten the amount of time between assignment due dates.

Hufflepuff defeated Slytherin during the February match, and Ron kept repeating the Gryffindor team's dire need to 'crush' Ravenclaw next match. Though he said it was for the glory of the cup, no one was fooled. Ron was still bitter about Hermione's behavior and made it his goal to destroy Ravenclaw be it in the halls or on the field.

Another thing, Harry narrowly avoided any talk of the other while with Ron or Hermione. It was an unspoken agreement that all three would like to forget that Hogsmeade weekend. Harry had put most of his talk with Sirius out of his mind, seeing how he couldn't have done anything about his parents' suffering. Sure, he was still miffed everyone kept it from him, but he went on as normal. He tried to contact Sirius a few weeks later, but he never answered; Harry wrote it off as an intense mission for the Order.

March brought with it mild weather, finally giving the students a much-deserved break. Harry found himself by the lake with Seamus, Dean or Neville quite often as they finished their essays while the giant squid swam lengths.

In fact, Harry groaned when he realized he was late for a lesson with Kaltag. The prefect had given him specific instructions to meet him in Greenhouse Seven at two, the N.E.W.T. project greenhouse. Shoving his books in his bag and shouting apologies over his shoulder to Neville, Harry climbed the hill and leapt through the door fifteen minutes behind schedule.

"I'm so — " his apology broke off as something burst from the soil and grasped his ankle. Harry lost his balance and fell to the ground, hands flailing out to catch himself to no avail. As his back struck the earth, cords of root shot out of the soil and snaked themselves around his arms as he grabbed for his wand. His torso was hugged firmly as more rope ousted the air from his lungs.

Quite suddenly, the attack stopped. With his head pressed back into the dirt and glasses skewed, Harry took a breath and learned taking deep breaths weren't smart. A satisfied chuckle broke through his panic and Harry found himself suddenly staring into identical green eyes. "Consider that payback from the rope burn you gave me last time." Harry struggled boldly, and the earthy restraints writhed and tautened. "Ah-ah! That wasn't too smart, Potter. I'm in control."

To make his point, the Being raised a brow and the Gryffindor felt the cords wring tighter around his wrists and ankles. He felt his wand slip completely from his grasp. "We're not using wands yet Potter, it'll only confuse you. And we wouldn't want you suddenly going Hufflepuff in the last stages of learning. But, it is learning. Loosen the bindings yourself . . . if you dare."

With a dark look in the smug Being's direction, Harry pressed against the roots. He tried moving his arms and legs, but found they were wound rather securely. After a few minutes of squirming in which he cut himself on a sharp vein, Harry huffed with effort. "Is there a point to this?" He irritably asked.

"Survival." The voice said from his far left. Harry rolled his eyes at the half-blurred roof. Following his futile grapple, Harry groaned in frustration at the prefect and the twine wishing they'd all disappear. Immediately, the bindings cowered and slid back underground. Adjusting his glasses, Harry pushed himself to his feet and wiped the dirt from his robes. "Eleven minutes? Pathetic."

He checked to make sure his wand was still intact and fought the urge to hex the boy with painful boils. After all, this was a greenhouse; bubotuber pus had to be somewhere close by to save him the trouble. "Not like you gave me a warning."

"Yes, because Voldemort will always give you a heads up when he's about to kill you." The Celestial affected a shrill voice. "Three seconds, Potter! That's all you'll get before the Cruciatus comes, pet!" Get real. Voldemort doesn't need elemental abilities to bewitch roots to catch you; you need to get a grip on these abilities."

Harry scowled at Kaltag's back, rubbing his stinging limbs. "Can we get on with it?"

"Kids these days: so impatient!" The prefect mocked before he sniffed and pointed to the worn table behind him. Harry spotted several fluffy towels and a large pail of what looked to be water. At Harry's confused look, Kaltag rolled up his sleeves. "You're getting dirty today, Harry. I guarantee it."

"Why?"

"We're traveling today." Kaltag distractedly answered while sniffing the air curiously.

"What?"

The Being's nose scrunched and he sniffed in Harry's direction. "Are you . . ." he inhaled deeply, ". . . are you bleeding?" Harry stroked his legs — nothing hurt — and finally felt discomfort on the back of his palm. A fresh red line marred across the faded 'I must not tell lies'.

"Yeah." He replied in bemusement. Kaltag's gaze sparked with something unreadable before he impatiently waved him off to the bucket.

"Right, this is like everything we've done before, but it's not," the Celestial began after Harry returned. "It's mindless, like blinking — you don't think about it, you just do it — but at the same time, requires immense concentration. You might be able to pop yourself in the ground, but you can't carelessly travel in that same mindset. You could end up falling deeper than you wanted to," Harry made a

face at that, "Or you could accidentally return to your physical form and trap yourself between the earth. Then you'd die from panic."

"Good to know." Harry uneasily nodded.

"And you're not just concentrating on moving forward," the Being rocked each direction, "backward, left, or right. You also need to focus on being clean and staying clean. Like so." The Being appeared to be swallowed by the dry soil, disappearing completely beneath the surface. Harry's eyes frantically searched the ground to make sure the boy didn't try any funny business.

Harry spun around at the sound of parched, hard soil breaking behind him. The only warning he got was a sizeable crack in the ground before the Being reappeared, emerging from the soil spotless, not a red hair out of place.

A thoughtful look crossed his face before, "That's another thing. This traveling somewhat is like apparating . . . you also need to remember to bring your clothes with you." He gave Harry a hard look. "And please, do try to come back with them . . . on." Harry couldn't even manage a weak laugh. He suddenly imagined Voldemort falling over his Death Eaters, wiping tears out of his red eyes as Harry fumbled to cover himself from view.

"So you could see how that could be successful, yet humiliating then?"

Harry grimaced. Kaltag's brow rose. "Well? It's your turn."

The two boys got to work, Kaltag divulging little information and hints, giving Harry a chance to find his center. Harry directed most of his energies in the wrong place and ended up maturing a few plants. Needless to say, the seventh years would be extremely surprised — if not pleased — with how far along their assignments were. But, he brightly thought to himself, he'd at least mastered nonverbal commands.

Harry believed he'd accomplished travel partially when he felt himself sink slightly into the ground, but realized he had only sunk in wet soil due to Kaltag's overzealous watering. He'd got as far in ground as his knees before he lost his nerve at the sudden submersion. The Gryffindor was grateful the Being didn't laugh at

him when he was yanked out; suddenly being swallowed by the ground was just as unpleasant as he'd anticipated.

As Harry brushed off his muddy trousers once more, his housemate suddenly hopped off the worktable and stared at the door. Turning his head slightly, he gave Harry a ruffled look. "Did you invite anyone here today?"

He blew out a breath, clearly confused. "No. Why?"

The Being ground out, "Weasley's coming."

"What? Why?" Harry ran to the grimy window in hopes of spotting the signature flaming hair.

"I don't know and I don't care, just get rid of the berk!" Harry bristled slightly at the Celestial's insults, but understood the reason for the unsociability. The two still hadn't spoken and were avoiding each other completely. Only classes interfered, and they'd always managed to sit on opposite ends of the room. Unfortunately for them, the distance wasn't far enough.

The door banged open for a second time that hour. Ron's face was redder than his hair, and Harry knew that wasn't a good sign. "Trouble astir? What've you done now, Weasley?" As Ron opened his mouth to retort, Kaltag replied, "Never mind, I don't care."

"Why are you here, Ron?"

The keeper scowled in exasperation. "What, I can't disturb you while you're busy with him?"

"That's not what I meant Ron," Harry returned equally annoyed. "Is there something wrong?"

"Yes, there's something wrong!" Bellowed Ron. "Lavender just told me Hermione's dating someone! I'll bet it's Boot!" His face became impossibly redder and his breath came in rough pants.

Harry seriously held back from throttling his best friend. He disrupted his lesson for this? Harry reigned in his anger and decided not to summon vines or something strong to squeeze the silliness out of Ron. "Ron..." he sternly began.

"Bravo, Hermione!" Kaltag chimed in across the table. "Good to know she's got the good sense to drop you."

"Shut up, you!" Ron snapped.

"So she didn't choose you: boo-hoo, get over it." The Being coldly scorned. "She has the concession to snog whoever she wants, as — nauseatingly — do you. For goodness' sake, let it go."

Harry gave the Paraffin a look of reproach. "You're not helping."

Ron bridled. "One day she's all over me and the next she's with Boot! What's wrong with her?"

Harry chose to ignore the Being's incredulous cackle. "Seriously Ron, if Lavender's your source, then it can't be true. Don't you think Hermione would've mentioned it?"

Ron's face scrunched in consideration, the deep lines in his forehead decreasing. Harry rolled his eyes. He decided the whole dating thing really was stupid. And judging between Ron and Hermione's actions, Harry really wasn't keen on attempting it again.

"But she's been . . . " Ron's confused whine broke through and his brown eyes strayed around at a loss. ". . . And he's — because . . . I don't . . . "

Right.

Correction: He was never going to attempt it again.

A heavy sigh butt in to his musing. "Good grief," Kaltag made a face. "If he's going to start blubbering, thus concludes our lesson." He left with an angry look at Ron and another door slam.

Harry rubbed the sudden knot that formed between his eyes. Pushing the bewildered prefect out the door, Harry began the slow trek back to the castle, Ron suddenly back to fuming about Hermione's behavior. If this is what he had to go through for the next few months, Harry couldn't wait for this year to be over.

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Harry watched with flagging eyes as Dean doodled on Yorick's wrist in Divination. He, as well as the other students, had drowned out the droning voice of one of their guest professors, as well as Trelawney's backbiting.

His heavy eyelids faltered as the class shuffled jadedly through their books at the professor's request. Ron mumbled as he propped his head up with his fist and plucked the petals off a flower in front of him.

"Waste of time," he muttered, stifling a yawn. "Who cares about flower signs?" Harry answered with a shrug as he followed the demanding questions, removing various flowers from his vase at his insistence. He set the rose aside because the color was too bland; he stuck the fern in Dean's vase because he thought it boring. The begonia was exchanged with Thanos for his white chrysanthemum, and the blinding narcissus reminded him too much of Lockhart. After a few more exchanges and deductions, Harry scanned down the list to identify his 'flower sign'.

"Tsk," a pitying tone sympathized over his shoulder. The significant clacking of bracelets and beads in his ear made his eyes roll. "Aconite, dear boy. Beware of fatal dangers to come." Trelawney's misty voice drifted as she pat his shoulder regretfully.

As she glided off Harry mournfully grumbled, "I'll remember to put them in my bouquet, thanks." Ron snickered as he handed Neville a water lily.

"Hopelessness," the batty-eyed professor bemoaned.

"It says 'goodness'," the unlikely Gryffindor corrected. Trelawney offered a woeful moan to the befuddled Neville and drifted across the room.

"Should've just burst into tears or had a fit," Ron proposed. "Would've made her happier." He dumped a handful of grass onto Basil's pile on the next table and set the flowers back in the vase and murmured, "No, that can't be right."

Harry raised a brow. "I thought you didn't believe in this stuff." He informed, gingerly refilling his own jug.

Ron shook his head. "I don't. This thing's just faulty." Harry incredulously nodded, pushing his vase aside to jot down his findings. A few tables over, he vaguely heard the eccentric teacher giving another somber diagnosis to a Hufflepuff. In the front of the room, Lavender and Parvati were busily exaggerating their results to anyone who would listen.

Tersely answering the questions, Harry forewent redoing his findings to scratch out Quidditch plays on parchment, at times getting Ron's opinion. Class was due to end in a few minutes anyway. "Hey, Ron? What d'you think of this?" He pointed to the intricate scheme under the scribbled out ones.

The redhead studied the parchment for a moment, shoving his vase aside. "You think Merrick could cover two chasers? He's good, but not that — "

"Oh!" Harry hastily shoved the parchment out of sight as Trelawney glided over. Her bulging eyes screwed into an odd look before she removed a few more flowers from Ron's container. The Gryffindors shared a comical glance and shook their heads in vexation.

At last, she looked satisfied at Ron, shrouding her arms in her scarf. "It seems you are a hyacinth, child. And red, too." Trelawney tsked her pathetic tsk of grief. Harry noticed Ron stiffened. "Your aura does match that of your sign, I have not seen that until now. Tell me dear, have you—"

But she didn't get to finish as Ron's ears turned red. Harry saw his best friend's face morph into several different unreadable emotions until his dark expression settled.

Fury.

Harry suddenly bumped into Neville as Ron shot up and snarled, "You old bat!" With that, he rashly upturned the vessel and charged out of the stifling tower. His heavy footfalls died after he thundered down the metal staircase. The rest of the class sat in shocked silence following Ron's flare-up, having not seen an outburst this impassioned since Hermione's great eruption back in third year.

Grabbing both his and Ron's things, Harry took off after the furious prefect ignoring Trelawney's feeble objections. He had no idea what set Ron off, no warning as to his impending explosion. Moreover, his elbow still throbbed from narrowly avoiding Neville and banging the table instead.

Harry had to admit, he'd had his fair share of wishes to shut Trelawney up, but he never thought to act on them. Ron . . . what had happened? One minute they were sharing a laugh and the next, Harry found himself half in Neville's lap. He had never seen Ron this fuming since . . . well, he'd never been close to this in the past. Speeding up his pace, Harry ducked into the common room finding a few scattered seventh years, but no Ron.

Likewise, the dormitory was vacant and no one had seen him. As students poured in before lunch, Harry left the tower and set out down the hall and tried the Room of Requirement. Not surprisingly, it was empty as well. Feeling a strange sensation of panic, Harry pushed through several students, making sure Ron wasn't hidden among them.

"Well, it's not like he can hide anywhere, he's as tall as Hagrid," he angrily muttered to himself, scanning the crowd. He nearly left the corridor to search another when he spotted a familiar head of bushy hair. "Hermione!" He called out, disregarding the nasty looks he was getting from some students. "Hermione." He breathed in relief, grabbing her shoulders.

The bookish Gryffindor favored him with a puzzled look as she forced a book in her bursting bag. "Have you seen Ron?" He immediately came out, guiding the witch away from the common room's route.

Hermione threw him an annoyed glance. "No, I haven't. Not that I really — " She paused, taking in his desperate expression. "What's wrong?"

"Ron went mad," he answered. "Completely livid and stormed out the classroom." Hermione gave him a disapproving look. "By the time I got down the stairs, he was already gone."

"Well, he's going to get in trouble for leaving class," Hermione affected her best critical tone. "And I'm not going to complain if he gets his prefect status taken away for it."

"He was really angry," Harry tried explaining. "I've never seen him so angry."

Hermione scoffed. "Of course you've seen him angry."

"Not this angry." Harry countered as they swept down the staircase. "I think something's wrong. Will you help me look for him?"

"I don't — we've got lunch, then Charms, and if we're late, Flitwick will — "

"Hermione," Harry pleaded, his eyes sincere and face flushed from frantic search. "Please. I know you two aren't talking, but he's still our friend. Your friend." The smart witch stamped her heel in frustration and looked away from him. Harry chewed his lip as she considered the appeal. "You'd never forgive yourself if you didn't check."

Hermione nodded imperceptibly with glistening eyes. Her gaze stared past his shoulder. "There's Ginny. Maybe she knows something." Harry headed for the chaser the moment Hermione spoke her name. "Have you seen — ?"

"Ron?" the redhead finished with a nod. "Yeah, what's his problem? Charged past me on the fourth floor without a word. Normally he interrogates me. Not that I don't mind his overlook, but he seemed upset."

"That's what we're trying to figure out." Hermione clutched her bag in one hand and her forehead with the other, suddenly looking more frazzled than before. "Did he say anything in class?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing. We were just doing flower signs in Divination."

The bright Gryffindor scoffed dislike. "Divination! Of course . . . !" The girls looked to him expectantly. Harry brushed his messy hair back.

"Something with flowers, and Trelawney just started rearranging his vase, but I can't imagine him getting upset about that."

Ginny shook her head. "No, that doesn't seem like him." Harry nodded in agreement.

"Right? It was absolutely bizarre! She just starts flinging his flowers around and goes on about a hyacinth and how bad it is and then I . . . " his account trailed off as he witnessed how still and pale Ginny became.

Just like Ron.

And just like her brother, her eyes darkened and her face contorted into a stoic mask. He shared a fleeting look with Hermione. "Ginny, what's wrong?" Hermione gently inquired.

Harry's brow creased. "Do you know something about this?" The fifth year pursed her lips and averted her gaze. Harry impatiently urged, "Ginny . . . "

He didn't expect her lash out as well. "Back off, all right?" The sixth years started at her sharp bark. Breathing heavily though her nose, the Gryffindor rounded the duo and headed stiffly for the Great Hall. "He'd better tell you." Was all she suggested before she disappeared into a swarm of students. Judging by the young witch's reaction, this was more serious than he thought.

The wizard was brought out of his baffled thoughts by Hermione's unyielding tugs. Together they pushed through their ravenous schoolmates up into the castle, heading for the place Ginny saw her brother last. "Fourth, she said?" Hermione anxiously confirmed with a nod, weaving through the busy bodies.

As they landed on the fourth floor, only a handful of students lingered, slowly making their way down the steps. It was apparent Ron was nowhere here. The pair rounded the corner and dashed up the wobbly stairway to the fifth floor, where their eyes widened in bewilderment.

Loitering near the statue of Gregory the Smarmy were about five prefects from varying years and houses. They loudly complained and rapped on the lavatory door, scowling and aiming their wands at

the knob. Exchanging curious looks, Harry and Hermione cautiously approached the annoyed company with frowns. Upon seeing the Gryffindors, Ernie Macmillan breathed with affected relief and met them haughtily.

"Oh, good! Potter's here," He called over his shoulder to the others, looking quite pleased. Harry narrowed his eyes at the prefect. "Potter, tell your friend to hurry it along. Some of us need to use the bathroom."

Harry eyed the group carefully. "All of you? At the same time?" He added to their affronted looks.

"What's going on?" Hermione calmly diverted Ernie's black look away from Harry.

"Weasley's shut himself in the loo." A Ravenclaw provided.

"He's been in there for ages, ignoring us." Another pitched in. Harry's brows knit tightly. He'd locked himself in the loo? What could he want there?

"Why?" Inquired the seeker. Ernie huffed tetchily.

"What do I care?" he countered crossly. "It's his problem, not ours. Just get him out of the bathroom already!"

Hermione must have seen Harry's dark look, because she quickly jumped in with, "He didn't say anything?"

"Nothing." The additional prefects tapped their feet impatiently on the stone, arms crossing their chests. Hermione bit her lip and stared at the sealed door. "Can you get him out?"

"Well, it may take a while."

"We don't have all day!" Ernie snapped.

Harry scowled, glaring at the proud Hufflepuff. "Ernie, I'm sure you can do without a gold-plated toilet for a spell. Especially if you need to go that bad." He skeptically added when the prefect moved to speak.

"That's not the point." The Gryffindors were waved off. Harry rolled his eyes with annoyance as he felt a lecture coming. "As prefects, we're supposed to share and are entitled to — "

"Get stuffed you bleedin' flobberworm!" Harry exploded, causing everyone to balk. "Get lost already!" His face reddened with rage, leaving no room for protests from anyone. The gathered prefects briskly left the corridor, shooting alarmed peeks at the livid wizard. With a content look to Hermione, the two finally approached the door. Harry felt a gentle pulse of magic a foot from the door, and supplied a shocked glance in his friend's direction. He didn't think Ron knew such a powerful locking charm. Ron really must've wanted to be alone.

It was simple: if he had wanted either of them there, he would've come for them, or waited back in the common room. True, he may not have been in his right mind at the time, but after he'd settled, he would've sought them out, right? Hermione made quick work of the barrier and after a few complicated spells and wand motions, the invisible tingling faded, and Hermione stared resolutely at the door. Before her hand shot out to open it, Harry pulled her back. She questioningly eyed him.

"Um, I dunno . . . what if he wants privacy?" It sounded lame even in his ears.

Hermione's quizzical face stormed. "Bugger privacy!" She hissed. "This is very serious if he's locking himself bathrooms! The Ron we know yells and screams and nearly breaks things."

At this, Harry's face fell. "If we know Ron at all." Hermione's eyes clouded at that. "I mean, honest — a flower? Who gets worked up about a flower, Hermione?"

Her only answer was the whispered password to the lavatory and Harry heard the door click open. Gathering his wits, Harry followed after, closing the door with a 'snap'. He took in the familiar sight of the prefect's bathroom, the polished floor and porcelain, as well as the deep trench of pool that was the bath. Soap fragrances lingered in the air from previous wash ups and Harry suddenly found himself envious of the prefects.

But his attention was drawn to the hunched figure, leaning over a sink, his face turned away from them. Hermione warded the door in layers and hastily shooed the jovial mermaid flashing her fins at Ron. Taking a few tentative steps toward Ron, Harry was half-relieved and half-surprised when Ron remained motionless.

"Ron?" Hermione was now at his elbow, eyeing Ron in the same manner. "Ron, are you all right?" If the figure's shoulder hadn't shifted, Harry would have thought it a statue.

"Yeah, mate. What's up? You just stormed out of Trelawney's class." Harry paused before, "Not that I mind — it was wicked funny — but what happened?"

Ron said nothing. He didn't turn around to acknowledge them.

Hermione's eyes shined with worry. "Ron, please. We're your friends." She pleaded. When that didn't work, she softly informed, "Ginny's worried as well."

The change was subtle, but noticeable. Ron's tense stature lessened somewhat and he seemed to breathe more freely. He still didn't turn around, but finally spoke. "She's all we have left, you know?" A significant look passed between the confused Gryffindors. "The only girl — if you don't count mum, really."

Harry's brow furrowed. "I'm . . . not sure what this has to do with flowers." His verdant eyes caught Ron gripping the edge of the basin tightly.

"Not a flower," his hardened voice fixed. "A hyacinth. Useless bat." The two remained quiet for the third to continue. "I never told you this, and I'm sorry, but it just seemed pointless to hang on it. I never meant to keep it a secret, honestly. It just never came up and we didn't want anyone's pity — we just wanted a normal life. I wanted a normal life."

The seeker's head began to ache from the circling explanation. "Normal life? Ron, what are you getting at?"

He watched as Ron's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Ginny . . . you want to know why we're so protective over her?" He whispered so quietly they had to move closer to hear him. "She's not just the



youngest in the family. She's the only girl. The only sister we have left."

The words played over and over in Harry's head. Only girl? Only sister? How many were there? Harry's face crumpled as he marveled at how he missed this.

"Ron," Hermione began, her eyes wide with recognition. "Are you saying — "

"Ginny wasn't the first girl we had in the family." He raised his head to look at their reflections in the mirror. His face was blotched with crimson over his unusual pallor. He gave the reflected seeker a terse, grim smile. "I was a twin."

The disclosure hit Harry like a trunk of bludgers. Ron had a twin? But it didn't make sense. Why would he keep that from them? "Oh, Ron." Hermione sympathized, squeezing his shoulder in support. "Will . . . will you tell us what happened?" Ron looked away from the mirror.

"We weren't always this poor, you know. Mum had her inheritance and dad worked at the Ministry. We had enough to get by and then some, without ever having to scrounge for anything. Mum had her hands full with Fred and George and the rest when they found out she was expecting twins again. Not unusual for any family with twins: I have twin cousins on dad's side, and my mum's aunts were twins. Everything was perfectly normal.

"It was still the first war: light against dark and Fudge against the Celestials. Dad told me it was pretty bad, with the new Ministry laws and all. They were barely seen anymore, only near our area, because Bill told me it was a common area for travelers." Ron smiled faintly. "Bill and Charlie used to tell us all sorts of stories about travelers bringing gifts and showing off at home to entertain us, like their way of saying thanks. Dad has always been fascinated with Muggles and other worlds. The way mum invites everyone home is no sham; the Burrow's door is always open.

"So it wasn't curious that they'd invited a Celestial there. All I know is he was in a bad way, and mum and dad helped him. Or her, because Celestials were tricksters, becoming a man or a woman or whatever to see the extent your generosity goes. Mum and dad

must've done admirably, because he blessed us with a 'tandem gift'." Ron swallowed thickly and stared into the cracked white bowl. "His only request was that my sister be named 'Hyacinth', after someone he knew fondly."

Hermione continued to rub Ron's arm in encouragement as Harry digested the new information. With a quick pat to Ron's shoulder in support, he waited for the sober redhead to resume. "We thought nothing of it until we were finally born. I was born first," Ron stated with some of his old smugness, "And she, second." His enlightened expression blackened as he stared at his shoes. "Then, the cord was barely cut before she was gone. Kidnapped."

The bushy-haired witch gasped in horror before holding on to Ron's arm like a lifeline. "That's awful!"

"Mum and dad shuttered Galleons into Aurors and private investigators for months, but it was impossible. Percy once explained to me that a newborn's face changes every day. What she may have looked like the day she was born is not what she would look like five days later. And so, practically knutless, mum and dad had to give up. It was an impossible hope anyway."

Ron leaned against the sink, crossing his arms. "Everyone was devastated, but there was nothing they could do. So, mum and dad had no choice but to move on. And then Ginny was born. They made sure nothing would happen to her, and as her brothers, we made that vow. I don't intend to break it."

Silence rang throughout the echoing lavatory, Hermione's slight sniffles breaking it occasionally. Harry found it hard to swallow with such a dry throat, and coughed at the effort. He wasn't mad at Ron for keeping it secret, he couldn't be. He'd be a hypocrite, considering his own hidden secret. Gently gripping Ron's shoulder, Harry scrutinized the floor before he inquired further.

"Did they ever find who did it?"

The keeper pursed his lips and shook his head. "They said it might have been a parent who lost their child in the war." Harry studied his hands as his conversation with Sirius came back to him.

"Voldemort took a lot of lives in the war. To scare them from getting even, I guess."

Ron's face faintly relaxed. "They never found anything. To this day, we don't know if she'd lived or if she's dead. If she did, she's probably left the continent anyway. Abductions were on the rise by the time You-Know-Who rose to power. I guess it was only a matter of time; mum and dad were always told they had too many of us, and . . . ." He trailed off, leaving the rest unspoken.

Hermione wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "You can't blame yourself, Ron. You weren't even a day old."

"I know there was nothing I could do, and there's nothing I can do now. I'm sorry I kept this from you. It's stupid, really."

"No." Harry firmly contradicted. Their brown eyes met his in puzzlement. Harry's jaw stiffened. "It's not stupid, Ron. Voldemort destroying lives is disgusting. And it's his fault you lost your sister. Things would just be — " Harry broke off with a heavy sigh. "They'd be different for all of us if he had been stopped. Voldemort's ruined all of our lives."

Ron's eyes dimmed with bewilderment, but he briefly smiled at Harry, then Hermione. "Thanks for this. I thought I learned to live with it." He gave a strangled sort of chuckle. "Guess not. But thanks."

Hermione shyly embraced him before wiping at her eyes. "Don't be afraid to tell us anything. We'll understand." Harry nodded his agreement and gave a start at the resonating chime of the bell. Ron pulled his bag out of Harry's hand; he had no idea he'd dragged it through the school.

"We'd better get to class, yeah?" Ron started for the door with a sniff.

"Oh," Hermione looked at his back, then Harry, and back again. "You know you . . . you don't have to go," She bit her lip as she said this. As if it pained her. "We could always tell Flitwick you aren't feeling well . . . and you could borrow my notes,"

She caught his eye for a split second then wrung the edge of her robes in her hands. Ron captured Harry's faint amusement and

smiled brightly for the first time since they'd been there. "Why, Hermione Granger. You are letting us skive off?"

And as if nothing had changed, Hermione's face fell into its usual disapproving frown. "Both of you? I don't think so." She pushed the laughing Harry toward the door. "We'd better get there before we're late. And don't even think about borrowing my notes for that!"

Though they all had matching grins on their faces following in Ron's wake, Harry knew that things were not the same. Hermione kept throwing concerned glances at Ron's back, looking as though she'd burst into tears any moment. Ron, though he nattered on about the upcoming Quidditch match, walked rigidly, and paused for long times in between conversation, as if deep in thought.

Their smiles and laughter never quite reached their eyes as they navigated the hallways. Harry stirred the new information about Ron and the news from his godfather around in his mind and couldn't help but feel furious.

When the sorcerer came after his parents, he was greatly upset, but somewhat unaffected. He hadn't known his parents well enough, and though it was depressing, he wasn't exactly bawling into his pillows. But now that Voldemort had caused the Weasleys such devastation, even if indirectly, he had set Ron's sister's kidnapping in motion. At this, Harry saw red.

Now, it was personal.

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A/N: Put your weapons down, folks; yes, I know it's been a while, and if you'd swung by the site and Group, you've heard the apologies. Summary: I'm sorry and it's my fault. I can't say it won't happen again, but hopefully it will not. With that being said, please read and leave constructive reviews, and I'll see you in Chapter 26.

## Chapter Twenty-Six: As They Seem (Abridged Version)

Warning: It's a bit gory and violent (not in my opinion, but then again I'm the writer). Nevertheless, there's some butchery ahead. You've been warned.

"Fly! Fly, you stupid melon!" Came the frustrated screech over the commentator's horn. Harry didn't catch the rest of the rant.

"If you're quite finished, Ms. Quirke . . . " Harry distinguished McGonagall's annoyed tone just as he plucked the Snitch out of the air. Rowdy cheers came from the sea of red and gold, yards below.

As Harry landed on the soggy pitch he heard a grumbled, "Potter's got the Snitch and Gryffindor advances to the Final against Hufflepuff, beating Ravenclaw 290 to 100. Bleedin' Chang . . . " Harry handed Madam Hooch the Snitch as he passed, shouldering his Firebolt. The Gryffindor team was hooting like mad, reveling in off-key song and tripping over their robes.

A heavy hand landed on Harry's back and he winced at the loud, hot cackle of glee in his ear. "Wicked, mate! You see the look on her face when you caught the Snitch right over the Ravenclaw's stand? Priceless!"

Harry half-smiled. "Yeah great, Ron." They had made it to the locker rooms and hastily cleaned and dressed themselves. It took longer than usual as the others were still whooping and bragging about, excited to make it to the Final.

"Yeah, no chance for Brittlebore, yeah?" Ron inquired as he knotted his shoes. "Paraffin's definitely got them beat, I'm sure. We'll know in a few minutes, right?"

The younger wizard frowned slightly. "Um . . . no. I think I'll sit this one out." Ron looked up, startled. "You go on ahead, Ron. I'll see you at the party later." The redhead continued to give him bemused looks as Harry made apologies and slipped back to the castle.

The day was gray, and the weather, muggy and wet in the final days of March as Harry trekked back to the school. He could still hear the riotous cheering from the stands even as he reached the second floor corridor.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Harry frowned. It wasn't that he didn't want to see the Sliatyckx match; he just had a lot on his mind for the last few weeks. What with Sirius' revelation, and Ron's outburst in Divination, he rarely found himself smiling as much. Not even proceeding to the Quidditch Final made him as happy as it used to.

Ron and Hermione knew nothing of Sirius' visit. He would tell them . . . eventually. No more mention was made of Ron's twin or Divination since that day in the prefect's bathroom. He did look a bit better though, as if he'd finally got a boulder off his shoulders.

Hermione at times looked anxious, as if she wanted to bring it up again, but didn't want to endure Ron's reaction. Harry didn't blame him due to the sensitivity of the subject. Though he was an honorary Weasley, none of them ever told him about the kidnapping. After all these years, it was probably still too fresh.

Harry considered going to the greenhouses to practice, but decided against it. Something could go wrong and then he'd have to explain why half his body was submerged in soil. After mulling his choices, Harry found himself staring at the Fat Lady. He muttered the password and entered the dim common room.

"...What's the point? You've been Alpha-Cae since first year." A low voice addressed. "The rest of us don't stand a chance." Harry entered the supposedly deserted room to see a handful of Celestials.

Harry spotted red curls behind a pile of books. "Oh, when you say such nice things to me, I get a warm, tingly feeling . . . "

"Please don't elaborate." Deep-voiced Thanos pleaded as the others laughed. He turned, startled to see Harry but greeted him, as well as the other girls. "Match that boring?"

Kaltag's eyes appeared over his history notes. "Gryffindor didn't win?" He sounded mildly surprised.

Harry shook his head. "We did." He sat a distance away from the girls painting their nails. "Sliatyckx hadn't started when I left."

The Beings nodded and Kaltag resumed his writing. "I thought you'd stay for the footrace and discus throw?"

"No." The Gryffindor's brows scrunched together. "Why aren't you at the game?" Kaltag set his quill down and rubbed his temple.

"Feeling ill." The Entities cooed in sympathy; Thanos rolled his eyes. "And our reserves are required to get one full game of airtime before the season is up." He paused before shrugging at Thanos. "That, and Brittlebore is pretty pathetic this year. It'd be a waste of time. I'll be back for the final."

He continued poring over schoolbooks and piles of notes. Thanos nudged Harry's knee, murmuring in distaste, "He'd rather spend time revising."

"P.E.G.s are coming up soon." The prefect retorted without looking up.

"You've been studying for them since second year. We don't need proof to know you're the smartest of the top years — trust us, we know."

Harry shook his head at the Beings and nodded to the dark-haired Being. "And you? Same excuse?" The boy nodded with shrug.

"I'm in the discus event."

They sat for a while, talking aimlessly of school and sport when the portrait opened. This time, Harry spotted familiar thick hair followed by Ron. Hermione was weighed down with books, while Ron looked on red-faced.

Harry frowned checking the clock on the mantel. "The match's not over already?"

Neville nodded as he wiped the water from his brow. "Simon caught the Scepter in fifteen minutes. Brittlebore didn't put up much of an effort." Ron supplied. Hermione deposited her books next to Kaltag's and sat beside him. Ron looked thoroughly peeved.

"Oh! You're studying? That's clever. Can I join you?" Harry watched as the Celestial threw a dismissive wave and Hermione grinned

before glowering at both wizards. "You'd be well off doing your work, too. N.E.W.T.s are coming up and I won't always be around to help you."

Ron rolled his eyes as Harry went to the dormitory for his books. There was nothing better to do, and when the Gryffindors returned, the party wouldn't leave much quiet for work. And he needed to do that essay for McGonagall; his grade was barely hanging onto an E. Aurors required no lower than E's in the subject.

When Harry reading, Ron desperately looked around for something to distract him. Unfortunately for him, many of the Gryffindors were already heading back out as it seemed the light rain had ended. The only one left was Neville, and he was reading up on modern Herbology.

Harry held down a snicker as Ron slumped in defeat and headed for the dormitory, returning with his books. Luckily, he hadn't seen Hermione's knowing grin as he left.

Harry heard him grumble, forcefully opening his Astronomy book and picking up his quill. He idly shook his head when Ron's attention frequently left his work to eye Hermione and the redheaded Being at the table. His cheeks seemed to redden deeply with each glance.

Harry hadn't even written a sentence for his Defense essay when the silence was broken. "Kaltag?" Hermione's tone questioned.

Both wizards looked up to see said prefect's eyes shift over to the rose-cheeked Ron, then back to Hermione with a smirk. "Yes, love?"

Ron seethed.

Hermione didn't seem to notice. "The Trojan War — Einar mentioned funeral games, but he didn't go into them. Do you know more about it?"

Kaltag beamed winningly, not looking at all unwell. "I do." He stole a quick glance to the redhead shaking with rage. His smirk deepened. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes again. "But I also need to bang these essays out and I need more books. This oLink is rubbish; shall we off to the library?"



Hermione frowned. "Well, I thought you weren't well; Endy told me you weren't playing."

He waved her off with a scoff. "Nonsense. I'll gladly drop everything just to accompany you to the library, Hermione. In fact, the library's far more pleasant than here, wouldn't you say?" Harry dryly sniggered as he budged closer so they were rubbing elbows. "I'd rather a cozy night with a sea of books than a warm common room any day. Darling, let's go!"

The witch's eyes brightened and she was already gathering her belongings with a smile. "That'd be great! I need some books as well."

Ron's quill snapped.

It went unnoticed by all but Harry. The pair stood and as they reached the entrance, the Celestial bared his polished fangs at Ron, smugly insisting, "Ladies first, dear." He led her out of the portrait with a hand hovering over her back, throwing a complacent grin over his shoulder at the fiery-haired keeper.

When the portrait closed, Ron spluttered and fumed, nearly upsetting Harry's books in the process. He sputtered words so angrily Harry couldn't tell which ones were curses or actual threats. He did make out a few names like 'Ginny' and 'Hermione' and 'Blue-Eyed Git'. But Ron seemed to have spat out his piece, because he then stomped upstairs without another word. Sighing, Harry went back to his essay.

Neville distractedly stopped reading as if just realizing Harry was there. "How long have they been at it?"

"A month." Harry began writing.

"And he did that purposely, right?"

Harry paused, gazing at him over the rim of his glasses. Smirking, he wryly replied, "Which one?" Neville laughed and reopened his book with a smile.

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Ron dropped onto the stool beside Harry, red-faced and scowling. The spectacled wizard busily wormed a finger in his hot ear. "What'd he say?"

Ron's scowl grew deeper. "Potions are created in Potions class for a reason: to be tested, Mr. Weasley. I am quite sure that is a bit more than the quota your small mind can fill for the day, but the least you can do is remember that'. Then he gave me detention, the git!"

Harry stifled a laugh at the awful impression.

"I wasn't about to swallow anything with crushed roach eggs."

Harry caught Hermione's disapproving look. "It was just Pepper-Up. Besides, we were too busy waving the smoke from our ears." She fanned her inflamed cheeks. "You lost marks for nothing. That was stupid."

"Weasley — stupid?" The arriving Being melodramatically gasped, staring at the irate Gryffindor. "Now, there's news . . . ."

"Shut up!" Ron retorted, upturning his chair.

Kenward then appeared from his office with a creased brow. "Settle down, boys. Take your seats." The prefects held their glares for a moment before Ron placed his stool upright and sat down heavily. Kaltag plopped into the seat beside Malfoy.

Harry sighed in irritation, shaking his head. Several other students scrambled into their seats as the Defense professor gingerly sat on the edge of his desk. "All right, what've we learned about nonverbal shields? Miss Granger?"

As Hermione spouted off an answer, Harry's mind drifted to lighter topics. The Defense Associations were doing well. No one seemed to have left the D.A. for Malfoy's sham. He'd vaguely heard the 'Serpents' were a success, but he thought that was about as valid as Voldemort fondly adopting Muggles.

He felt Ron shift to glare at Malfoy's table and received double the black looks for his effort. Harry refrained from digging fingers into his forehead. It was mid-April and the two prefects were still at odds.

Harry had taken to ignoring the red-haired boys, especially their confrontations.

The mood in the dormitory was thick with tension, but that was resolved when Kaltag began waking up earlier than everyone else and turning in hours after midnight. Icarus had blamed his crankiness on lack of sleep and pressure. Fortunately, he was always in a fair mood during training; they probably would have destroyed the conservatories if they'd clashed one day.

The sudden scraping of stools and the moving of bodies dragged him from his thoughts. Harry was eagerly abandoned by Ron, who was making a beeline for Hermione; but she had already settled herself in his seat, beside Harry. With a piqued expression, Ron plunked into the seat beside an uneasy Ella.

"Oh, um . . . what're we doing?" Hermione stared at him darkly from the corner of her eye.

"Weren't you paying attention?" She hissed, flipping pages and pulling out parchment.

"I was," Harry toyed with a loose string. "But I didn't understand."

Hermione rolled her eyes, slumping in contempt. Of course she knew he was lying. "We're revising with partners and practicing more of the light spells. Kenward's gone to his office." She furiously began writing.

Facing the front, Harry noted the professor had indeed retreated to his office. Shrugging, Harry listened to the murmuring of his classmates. He wasn't about to argue with a free period.

He'd lazily turned pages in his book and doodled on the edge of his parchment before he came to an overlooked section of his book, wringing long forgotten thoughts out of him. "Hey, Hermione?" She softly grunted to show he had her partial attention. "Did you ever find anything else on that Bellotaur thing?" Harry whispered, keeping a sharp eye out for any snooping. Across the aisle, Ron kept his eyes intently on him.

"No, I haven't found anything of late." She dipped her quill hastily and it skritchd on parchment. "Granted, I haven't looked into it for

months. Revisions and all, you know." The seeker faintly sighed, turning another page. "You could revise, you know." She urged. "Or at least use this time to start Snape's essay."

His forehead creased. "Maybe Kenward's books have something. And it's due in two weeks." Argued the wizard coolly.

"You'll regret that come morning." Ron was suspiciously peering through Ella's ponytail at the two. Harry replied with a scoff, flicking through pages.

The rest of the period passed in companionable silence, Harry scribbling drawings and Hermione on her tenth piece of parchment for the session, studiously writing comments. At the end of the hour, Kenward dismissed them with a heavy assignment that made even his admirers groan in protest. Hermione looked positively giddy.

Harry dwelled on his thoughts about Hermione's lackluster information and packed slower than the rest of his weekend-ready classmates. Hermione nudged him and nodded to the door, but he shook his head. "I'll meet you later." She gave him a wary nod and proceeded to haul Ron out the door.

The room was deserted when Harry shouldered his bag and strode across to the stairs. He settled on the landing and peered curiously through the slight gap in the door.

Kenward was leaning over his desk, a heavy sigh wrung from his lip as he examined the quartz. Harry recognized it as the glowing crystal from the Hollows. The glow was weaker now, almost nonexistent. Not wanting to face the consequences of being caught, Harry rapped his knuckles over the weathered door.

He stepped out of view as Kenward noisily shuffled around the small office before opening the door. Dark eyes softened when they spotted him. "Mr. Harry Potter; to what do I owe this visit?"

Harry flexed his fingers, biting his lip, his eyes cast downward. "Er . . . I felt the urge."

The professor blinked. "'Urge'?"

Harry grinned lopsidedly. "To break into your office. Again." Kenward's eyes hinted recollection and he deeply laughed, shaking his head.

"Most amusing, Mr. Potter." He waved him inside, offering Harry a seat, which he politely refused. "What can I do for you, Harry? You've a strong impulse to nick one of my quills, then?"

Harry didn't loiter. "Bellotaur's."

Kenward vaguely faltered. "What?"

"Bellotaur's." He repeated. "D'you know anything about them?" Kenward frowned deeply.

"I'm surprised you've heard of them, actually." He eyed the Gryffindor sharply. "You're still meddling in this business?"

Harry started at the word 'meddling'. He had a right to want to meddle; this was his life. If he was this . . . creature or warrior, he needed the facts. If not (he mentally crossed his fingers at this), he would be able to at least help whoever it was. "I don't want to be surprised if this Ch — warrior, turns out to be me."

The instructor faintly smiled. "Ah, I see. You've accepted your destiny."

"Might not be mine." Harry countered. The man chuckled, plunging his hands in his pockets.

"True." Intense brown eyes bore into his, sincerely interested. "What makes you think the Child is a Bellotaur?"

At this, Harry frowned. What did make him think so? They didn't have much evidence to go on. "I don't know." He answered honestly. "Hermione told me they were warriors, and well, the Child is supposed to be a warrior. We haven't had much information coming to us."

Kenward nodded, pulling at his beard. "Theories, not much to go on. One day it's a woman, the next it's a man. Today they might be good, and tomorrow, the vilest of evils. Just a roundabout mess."

Harry readily nodded, shifting his weight. "Maybe Youngblood wrote something else about it?" Kenward looked hesitant. "Not that I'd borrow your books or anything, I just wanted, um . . . information."

Which wasn't a total untruth. What he really wanted to know was if this could be true. These sudden abilities this year, and the prophecies he'd heard in the last year; were they linked somehow? Could the power Voldemort (hopefully) did not know about be hand in hand with the Child of Phoenix? Harry tried to swallow, but his dry mouth wouldn't permit it. Kenward was awfully silent, staring at his cluttered desk. "Professor? Do you know something?"

He curled his chin hair between his fingers. "From what I've learned, they don't exist. They're mythical. A wizard pipe dream, really."

"And the Phoenix Warrior?" Kenward mechanically reached for the dangling necklace, shaking his head. Harry heaved a sigh, slumping against the wall. "Do you know anything about the Child of Phoenix, then? Any details? Anything? What about your books?" He gestured to the battered trunk in the corner.

The professor cocked his head to the side. "You really like those books, don't you?" Harry didn't answer. "Why are you so interested now?" He narrowed his eyes somewhat. "I would've thought you'd do either one of two things: forget completely about it, or hound me right after you found the weapons." He began to pace the short span of his office. "I know nothing more about the Child than I did when I began this school year. And all I knew was that the Child was here, at Hogwarts, or close to it."

"I know that already." Harry pointed out reluctantly. "I just . . . I don't . . . ." Want it to be me, he inwardly finished.

Kenward resumed his stride. "I am sure come the end of this school year, Amenophus and the Scepter will be in the right hands."

"Necks."

The elder wizard chuckled. "Right. Man or woman, young or old."

Harry absently rubbed his scar. "Have you considered the students?"

"Not without arousing some suspicion." Harry frowned at that. Of course he had to be careful with Dumbledore. "I need to find them before I leave Hogwarts. My time is running short."

The Gryffindor furrowed his brow. "You . . . you're not staying?" Kenward's haunted eyes darted to his before he peered out the window. "You can't leave." Harry shook his head in refusal. He wasn't the best Defense teacher they'd ever had, but he was efficient.

Kenward graced him with a distressed grin. "I've already set back my journey for year, taking this position."

Harry's brows disappeared into his fringe. "But why do you need to travel if you're handing both weapons down?"

At this, the instructor smirked. "What makes you think my great grandfather only made two weapons?" Harry gaped, at a loss to reply. Kenward took this opportunity to guide him toward the door. "Do not fret over such things, Mr. Potter. If chance decides this burden is yours bear, I will see to it that you are ready. But for now, we can only wait as chaos stirs us nearer and nearer to the storm. My sojourn here will soon come to an end." His eyes flickered with something unreadable. "I must prepare to leave for good." With a dismissive smile, they let the conversation drop from there.

Harry trudged back to the tower, thoughts of Bellotaur and prophesied warriors eddying in his brain.

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Harry handed Ginny his broom as Ron stormed up the hill. Sweat stung his eyes from another intense practice. Since their progression into the finals, Harry had let Ron take over training. It certainly hadn't seemed like a bad idea at the time; but now, Ron demanded they practiced three and four times a week for hours at a time. Though Harry was annoyed by the heavy workouts, he grudgingly admitted they were necessary; Hufflepuff was serious about winning the Cup this year.

But they weren't talking strategy about the Badgers. Alas, their conversation centered on a certain Paraffin, whom Harry was scheduled to meet at the greenhouses. Ron was wet and red, and

not all of it was from Quidditch practice. Frankly, Harry thought this argument was bordering on utterly ridiculous. "Remember what you told me about mending things with Kaltag? For the sake of the alliance an all?"

The co-captain blew out an angry breath. "That's different." He hissed.

"How?"

"I didn't know he was such a jerk back then." Harry muted an exasperated grumble in his sleeve, effectively ending the discussion. Ron lumbered into the school as he maneuvered to the last greenhouse. He expected a bit of a rest for a moment, but was terribly mistaken.

For the second time he opened Greenhouse Seven's door, something attacked him. Luckily, Harry ducked the bright green beam that disturbingly resembled the Killing Curse. Wand in hand, Harry rolled to the ground pointing it in the direction the ray came from.

He growled in annoyance as he eyed a smirk. "That's the second time in a month, Potter. Honestly, have you learned nothing?" the prefect drawled. Harry clenched his teeth and pocketed his wand, brushing the dirt off his robes.

"You sound like Snape." He took great pleasure in the redhead's grimace. "I thought you said you'd be a bit late?"

Kaltag moved to one of the small plants on the workbench. "Prefects meeting. Well, really it was a team meeting with Thetis." Harry moved around the bench, toying with various leaves. "Apparently, Selene's joke about royal walnuts didn't bode over so well with the professors. Everyone else disagrees."

The match finals were looming ahead, and the houses were becoming fraught with tension. The Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors weren't exchanging insults as bad as the Paraffins and Voltaires. Any time either of the houses crossed, there was a jeering match that turned from droll to tremendously malicious.



Their comments and reactions were offensive, if not worse. Harry recalled Jason Quon's Potions homework and year's worth of notes suddenly bursting into flames when he mocked Kaltag's appearance. The fiercest exchanges were between the rival seekers, Selene and Kaltag. Their words weren't quite as nasty, but professors did not find their suggestive remarks any better.

Harry was silently chuckling on the 'royal walnuts' memory when he spotted a sullied Herald under a mound of dragon manure. Curious, he swiped away the compost with a discarded glove. It was today's paper, with a dark blonde Entity waving on the front. The title was illegible.

"Athena Rallies Cabinet — Abdication Imminent?" The prefect recited from a few plants away. "Of course she's meeting with the Cabinet; she's part of the Cabinet."

The Paraffin's tone was begrudging as he hunched over a pot. It felt unseasonably warm in the greenhouse, uncomfortably warm. The Celestial's gaze narrowed at the plant he was busily tending to when his eyes suddenly burned with verdant fury.

Harry leapt back as Kaltag grunted and threw another green beam at the shrubbery. It broke into a violent purple blaze, charring into a fine powder before the ashes drifted away in a light breeze. Harry felt an excitable stirring in the plants around them as his tutor slumped over the workbench, eyes averted. The plants gradually returned to stillness.

Harry found himself speechless. Obviously seeing his mother affected him more than he cared to admit. Kaltag had never lashed out like that before; then again, Harry had only known him a few months. When words of comfort failed to form, Harry gave up and inquired, "Isn't that . . . wasn't that dark magic?"

His back was turned to Harry as he began his explanation; his tone sounded vaguely relieved. "Magic is what you make of it. If the caster's intent is for dark purposes," he extended his hand to another budding plant, slowly blooming into a Sentiment, furiously crimson. "Then yes, it is classified as dark magic. But remember," The plant fiercely shook before its blossoms blackened, followed by its leaves, and it finally wilted. "The Tickling Spell is only a hair's

breath away from the Cruciatus. Same concept, different objectives, startling results."

Harry warily nodded as Kaltag massaged his chest and rolled his sleeves. "Chest pains?"

The Being darkly chuckled. "I wish. Met Corner and Voldemort's biggest admirer on the way. You know, Wacko Wickham? The Ambrosia addict?" Harry mildly sympathized. "Gilliam had him cornered for scaring first years? Not the best plan: such a small space, not enough clean air. I could smell the fumes on him."

Harry shrugged off his robe. "Wickham the Whacked, you mean?" Kaltag shrugged. "I thought it was a Floo addiction." He allowed Kaltag to set him in position, his hands lingering on his shoulders.

Kaltag made a thoughtful noise. "Whatever strokes his fancy, then." Harry chuckled. "Now then, since you seem to be seriously lacking the traveling gene, we'll move on to defensive and offensive dueling."

Harry inwardly sighed with relief. He was getting nowhere with earth traveling. The most he'd gone was a bit higher than his knees, and even then it'd taken him weeks to reach that point.

Kaltag's voice was quieter, but swept richly over his senses. "I want you to think. Focus. Close your eyes if you must." Harry did so, wondering what he was up to. "Concentrate. Visualize Earth, Harry." Harry pictured the planet, bright against the black void of space, a vivid mixture of blues and greens and whites. "Now picture Earth and the power it has, the power it is."

Plants and water and land sprang up in Harry's thoughts. That was strange; he had never associated plants with power. "Do you see that power, Harry?"

Harry nodded vacantly.

"This is the power she offers you. And it's all for your use. Think of her energies she has yet to use, all at your disposal. An offering. A privilege."

And suddenly, the blue water was energy; the swaying plants crackled with it; even the useless dirt was full of power. Harry squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to hold to the image of Earth's aura.

"It's all for your utilization, Harry. Share her gifts. Use them. You need only to unleash it." The Gryffindor focused hard, wanting to use the potential, unleash it into something good, something great.

All of a sudden, he felt a great whoosh in him, as if the air was knocked out of his lungs, but not really. As if his blood had stopped pumping, but moved without restraint. And suddenly, he realized he was buzzing. Buzzing with energy, and he knew.

He felt the Earth draw into him.

His eyes shot open when he heard a crash, followed by a sizzling burn. On the bench, another Sentiment had withered to black ashes. Staring in shock, he wondered if he had caused that. Kaltag came into view, his head tilted to the side. "Wow. I never asked you to focus on a specific target. Bravo, Potter."

"That was — I — me?" The Being sighed, eyeing him in mild disapproval.

"No, the Ghost of Christmas Past. Yes, you." Harry ignored the taunt, his attention focused on the Celestial's palm, holding a glowing ball of green something.

"Earth has more power than all elements. Being alive, it has the power to regenerate; with that, comes active energy." He gestured to the hovering mass of green nothingness and it pitched over to Harry. The Gryffindor jerked and caught it, glad for his reflexes.

He thought it might have stung him, but surprisingly, it felt warm and somewhat heavy, despite its small crackles of lightning. Its warmth and energy gradually traveled through Harry's arm in tingling waves, making him feel unexpectedly energetic.

He felt he could play a hundred Quidditch matches without tiring. As if he'd read his mind, Kaltag's mouth quirked. "Exhilarating rush of power, isn't it?" Harry could barely nod the pulses of energy felt so great, clouding his mind. "Now focus and absorb the energy. Picture

the ball disappearing into your palm, traveling up your arm and reaching your core. Adding to the magic that's already within you."

It was much easier to picture it that way, and the ball vanished beneath his skin in a matter of seconds. The rush of energy made him smile before he felt the first wash of calmness. Regaining his composure, Harry had a silly grin splashed across his face. "Can we do that before every match?"

The Being snorted, shaking his head. "Unless you want to crash and burn before you catch the Snitch. Though the power gives you energy, it uses your reserve stores of energy as well." The Gryffindor frowned, knowing it was too good to be true. "But at least you get a good night's rest. All right, on to beckoning."

Harry was taught how to summon the energy from plants and to compress the power into something useful: orbs of energy. After summoning a few orbs to get a feel for it, Kaltag urged him to cancel out his orb with the other.

A green beam was hurled in his path and Harry conjured a similar sphere, tossing it in the direction of the other. The energies crashed leaving colorful sparks in their wake. "Very good." The Being eyed him slyly. He straightened his stance and raised his arms in the standard dueling posture. "En garde, Potter."

Before Harry could reply, several green orbs darted in his direction. He dodged most of them, but couldn't escape them all. He hissed when one struck his shoulder, leaving a deep ache in its place.

"Careful," the prefect smirked, calling upon another jolt of energy. "They bruise." He tried lifting his shoulder, but he could barely move it without it throbbing. Kaltag hurled more spheres at him before Harry finally began defending himself, ducking behind worktables and throwing a few of his own. He heard the telltale crack and sizzle of orbs crashing into each other, and stifled a laugh when Kaltag exclaimed in shock. Apparently, the last orbs he let loose hit their marks.

When he came out from behind a bench, he was pleased to see Kaltag clutching his side and glaring. Well, Harry thought, at least he dodged most of them.

"Let's even the odds," the Being panted. "Wand out, Potter."

Kaltag's flashing eyes were his only warning, glinting from green to reddish-orange before he dived to avoid a jet of fire. The air roared and the heat singed the back of Harry's jumper.

Furious, the wizard jumped to his feet and shouted, "How was that evening the odds?" Harry seethed further as the Being shrugged.

"I never said which odds they favor. You didn't call Celestial or Wizard."

"You didn't tell me."

"You didn't ask."

"I didn't know!"

"I didn't care." Harry took the initiative and threw the first spell as soon as he felt his wand in his hand. He shot off more spells than orbs because he had the upper hand in Wizardry; Kaltag used more orbs and fancy tricks.

As Harry dropped to avoid catching fire, he felt something clutching at his legs and arms. His green eyes narrowed at the vine and root and branches grabbing for him, and with barely a thought, Harry redirected them to his attacker. Plants were growing wildly all around him, either reaching for him or his dorm mate.

Harry scrambled away from chittering Flitterbloom branches, kicking out as they grasped his ankle. A quick spell took care of them, and Harry roused another ball of energy, bright emerald and fizzing with power. With a deep grunt he flung it at the Being's feet.

To his displeasure, Kaltag leapt back as the orb shattered and sizzled, flickers of lost energy fading into the ground. The redhead landed on his feet, crouched and winded. "Draw!" He called out, falling to his knees. "Draw! I need a break." Harry panted in answer, falling on his back and groaning.

"Yeah." He hadn't even realized the sweat pouring off of him, his body aching. Kaltag crawled into view.

"It's obvious you're a better wizard than I." He leaned heavily against the table leg.

"Yeah." Harry breathed, wiping his forehead. "And you can throw fire." The greenhouse was quiet, save for the boys' fading chuckles and wheezes. "I talked to Kenward."

Kaltag released a sharp grunt as he crumpled beside Harry.

"I was wondering if my . . . unique abilities," he searched for the right words, "have anything to do with . . . you know."

"Probably," the older boy replied. "I mean, you've never had them before, right? I'm very positive you are. But," Harry scowled at his amused tone. "Enough talk." Harry felt the plants stir around them as they leaned toward the Being, feeding him power. "Round Two."

With a protesting groan, Harry forced himself to his feet, knowing he'd feel worse tomorrow.

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Harry ducked as Hermes' chariot nearly clipped his head. Today was the Final. Normally, he'd be somewhat nervous, weighing the team's chances of winning. But today, he was nervous to the point of numb. He only answered with grunts whenever someone steered him into conversation.

"Today's the day." Someone — he thought Ginny — anxiously declared. Harry replied with a grunt. "Aren't you excited?"

"Tickled." He flatly responded. Ginny — or whoever it was — wordlessly returned to their breakfast. The Great Hall was buzzing; it was actually louder at the Parador's table, due to several young Entities practicing (More like butchering, Harry mused) scales over the rack of toast. Harry vaguely heard Hermione discussing the upcoming production of some drama.

Icarus gave them a sour look erupting, "Enough squawking, you parrots! There's a reason you're not in choir!" The Entities harrumphed, righteously affronted.

Commotion began at the doorway causing Harry to finally look up from his barely touched meal. The rest of Paraffin and Voltaire's teams arrived at breakfast to cheers and heckles from their respective houses.

"Don't worry, Smythe," Selene Magnus innocently called out. "I'll go easy on you, just because you're a boy." She grinned mockingly.

Kaltag returned with, "All right, Shrimp. I'll go easy on you, too; just because you're one as well." Though the Paradors laughed, Hermione wasn't in the least bit amused. She glared when Ron and Harry dared to snicker.

Harry soon found himself knotting the last lace in his boots, surrounded by his teammates. He wasn't nervous . . . not really. Hufflepuff was terribly good this year, no doubt about that.

He tried to focus on Ron's pep talk, but found himself fascinated by the shades of white and green Ron was turning; it certainly made his freckles more interesting.

"Harry?" He was startled from his scrutiny of Ron. The pale-faced, freckled keeper stared, his brown eyes large and anxious. "Anything to add?" He prompted nervously, gesturing to the other players.

Harry blinked, his Firebolt very slippery in his palm. "Er . . . " Six pairs of eyes bore into him. "Um . . . team?"

They all blinked.

Harry swallowed thickly. Somebody cleared their throat.

"Er..." Harry started. The eyes immediately fell on him. "Let's keep the Cup in Gryffindor." They all nodded firmly and he swore he heard Ginny mutter something about not letting the butterbeer go to waste.

He followed his team out, noticing the air was very wet and cold, a sign hinting at bleak flying conditions.

Across the field, he spotted the canary yellow robes of Hufflepuff. Their faces weren't exactly unreadable; he could see nervousness and determination in their eyes. Harry sighed uneasily. He sure

could use that dose of energy right now, even if he would regret it tomorrow.

The stands holding the represented houses chanted so loudly, Madam Hooch nearly gave up her lecture halfway through. Finally, they were up in the air, and the Quaffle was released. Harry gradually rose high above the game, watching for the Snitch. Summerby, the Hufflepuff seeker followed close behind.

"An' it's a good start for Hufflepuff gaining the Quaffle on the firs' drop," Orla began avidly. "Showing jes' how much work Gryffindor 'as cut out for them today."

Harry eyed the chasers tracking Hufflepuff like hounds, swarming whoever had possession of the Quaffle. "Smith loses the Quaffle to Warner, the game is still naught-naught."

This went on for an hour, the chasers hording the Quaffle, the thwack of the beaters' bats audible every so often, and Harry and Summerby diving and feinting after the Snitch. Gryffindor was up 110 to 90, and with the last glide of the Quaffle into the center hoop, Gryffindor still led, but only by ten points.

Apparently the Snitch wasn't too fond of the rain either; he'd only seen it once in the last hour. "Ouch! Quite a bruise that'll make! The score is tied at 110. With the way they've been playing of late, one wonders what's come about to change Hufflepuff 'round. It's as if they woke up one morning and discovered, 'Oho! I play Quidditch!' World's brightes' scholars they are, the lot o' them . . . ."

"Last warning, Miss Quirke." Echoed McGonagall's flustered tone. Harry chuckled; Orla was still taking Ravenclaw's loss to Hufflepuff to heart.

The crowd of Gryffindors suddenly roared, causing Harry to follow their gaze. "Uh-oh, Gryffindor on a breakaway! Warner to Weasley, Weasley to Warner, Warner to Weasley to Schmetterling to the — oh! Saved by Stebbins! Can't the Gryffindor beaters knock 'im out already?" There seemed to be a struggle with the commentator's horn thereafter.

Harry wiped the water from his eyes, his hair sticking in clumps to his forehead. His broomstick swerved at his slight touch, narrowly



avoiding Merrick. Summerby was circling the posts beneath Ron, his eyes darting back and forth to Harry and the air.

Harry stretched his arms, stiff from gripping the broom so tightly. He sighed heavily; he'd rather be in the stands just watching right now, rather than in the air, waiting. The game was going on two hours and his legs could do with a good stretch.

Just as Harry kicked off to circle the pitch again, chaos ensued. "HAH! Summerby's spotted the Snitch!" The commentator exclaimed. Harry's eyebrows flew into his fringe and he kicked hard and flattened himself, reaching Summerby in mere seconds. "An' Potter's spotted him! Could this be a feint he's trapped 'imself into?"

Harry narrowed his eyes as they raced over the commentator's stand, the golden ball in their line of sight. The Snitch bluffed several times, daring left and right, but neither seeker was fooled. Harry knew Summerby was good; even on his Comet series racing broom.

As they pulled into a steep dive, Harry heard a loud whack from his left. The Hufflepuff beaters were aiming for him. Harry tipped his broom slightly to prevent a collision, his eyes still focused on the Snitch.

Another bludger was whacked in his direction but Kirke and Linwood arrived, walloping their bludger at Summerby. The seeker faltered, but kept on course. The Snitch danced mockingly before them before it once again took them upward.

A pained groan escaped one of Hufflepuff's beaters and Harry absently heard about his spiral downward. Around both seekers, the beaters continued to duel with bludgers left and right, narrowly missing their seekers. "Another goal by Hufflepuff, now 150 - 110; Weasley better watch the rings rather than 'is seeker's ar — "

"QUIRKE!"

But Harry's eyes were on the Snitch, and there they remained. It was time to end this; his arms were tired and as he swallowed quickly, he realized his dry mouth could do with a warm butterbeer. Seizing control of his Firebolt with one hand, Harry stretched his right arm out.

Summerby was onto him, both seekers side-by-side, arms reaching for the prize. The Snitch was barely touched by their fingertips; Harry could feel its wing fluttering madly against his thumb. He didn't dare look at Summerby to see how close he was.

"It looks like a dead heat! I can't tell which one's gettin' it!" Orla's voice was somewhat distant; how high were they in the air? The beaters were still with them, locked in their own battle. Harry grunted as Summerby elbowed him, but luckily it didn't knock him off course. Gritting his teeth, Harry reached farther.

Summerby suddenly groaned and wavered, his hand falling back from the Snitch. Harry bit his lip and lurched his broom faster, his hand closing over the Golden Snitch.

With a relieved sigh, Harry dropped back to the ground, all his fatigue leaving him as the Snitch tried to bat its way out of his hand. "POTTER'S GOT THE SNITCH! MERLIN'S CRYSTAL BALLS, GRYFFINOR WINS!"

Harry swooped over to the goals and high-fived a red-faced, hooting Ron. Madam Hooch came over to congratulate them and took the Snitch. "God, Harry! That was scarily brilliant!" Ron shouted as they flew to the grass. "We've got the Cup!"

The stands were pandemonium; the Gryffindors and Paraffins spilled onto the pitch as the winning team huddled together. Harry was knocked down by an overzealous Hermione, who kept jabbering about a bludger coming 'this close to his head, and how she'd never forgive him if he'd died . . . .'

The Hufflepuff players limped back to their locker room with bowed heads. "QUIDDITCH CUP TO THE LIONS!" Orla cried out to more cheers from Gryffindor. "Eat that, Utter-Fluff!"

"QUIIIIRRRKE!" But even McGonagall sounded in good spirits. Madam Hooch presented the large cup to both he and Ron, who were then raised onto the shoulders of a smirking Nikola, much to their embarrassment. Ron continued to bellow indistinct while Harry was just relieved it was all over.

"May I have your attention?" A stern but polite voice came over the arena. McGonagall sounded rather out of breath, as if she'd done

some rejoicing of her own. "Though I understand the reason for your celebration — " She was cut off by more roars of approval from the winning house. " — You would do well to remember there is another championship match scheduled after this. Please defer the festivities a wee bit longer and return to your seats now."

The Gryffindors, of course, howled in victory while returning to their seats.

The Gryffindor team walked separately to the stands, smiles so wide on their faces Harry knew they'd hurt tomorrow. He considered heading in early as the wash of excitement slowly started to leave him, but Ron had no plans for either of them ditching the Sliatyckx match. "With the way they've been banging at each other these last months? We are not missing this!"

After they greeted Hagrid and sat by Hermione, Harry stared at the pitch, gaping. The players milled, warmly chatting with each other. They seemingly ignored the chants of 'Sudden Death' and 'Bloodbath' from their houses.

Harry made a noise of disbelief at the seekers who were at each other's throats just this morning. Kaltag lay flat on the grass, his arm thrown over his eyes with Selene's head on his stomach, laughing quietly.

It looked as if the teams hadn't just offended, jeered and downright threatened each other in the last few weeks. "What the — !" Apparently, Ron had caught on, too. "They look like bloody drinking buddies!"

Hermione shushed the crimson-cheeked keeper as the players took to the air. "One, two, three — this is the place to be! Welcome one, welcome all, to the annual SLIATYCKX BRAWL!" Stavros roared from the commentator's stand.

Wild cheers exploded from the stands. "It's no surprise Paraffin has made it here yet again as the defending champions for the past four years. But don't count Voltaire out yet; this could be their time."

The players moved in beginning formation before the ball was released. Harry studied each of the fierce-faced players, no longer

smiling and buoyant as before. "Back to enemies, then." He muttered. Ron hummed in approval, on the edge of his seat.

As the Sliotaur was released and the players converged, a resounding "Let the bloodbath begin!" was heard over the entire arena. Harry had no idea just how right Stavros was.

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"...ooh!" Stavros laughed. "And down goes Quon!" Hermione made a sound of appall as Icarus and Yorick savagely tore at the robes of another orber. Ron had a look of sickened fascination on his face. Harry's eyes were wide as saucers.

He never remembered the game being this cutthroat. "Welcome the world of contact sports, Hogwarts." Stavros had mocked sometime ago when the crowd reacted at the sound of snapping bones. Ron and Hermione never looked so green. He doubted he looked any better. To his surprise, the professors did nothing about it.

There was a lot of body slamming and tackling. Quite a few times orbers and sliats broke off to wipe their bloody noses and raced back in the game. Miraculously, Paraffin was only short an orber. "Carlisle's incognito as an orb . . . " Stavros casually commented as the player was ripped from the air and sucked into the ball. "And — hey! Penalty to the Phoenixes due to Magnus' tantrum."

The Sliotaur sailed through the square. "Paraffin's back up, 170 to 160. Back to the fray, ladies and gents!"

Harry could hardly keep his eyes off the game, despite the bone-breaking, blood-spilling nature of it all. Hermione finally had sense to cover her eyes. "And here's Magnus with an excellent execution of the Agamemnon, officially known as the Annexation of Troy for all you by-the-book fanatics out there. When's Smythe going to retaliate? You do know you can tackle her, girl or no . . . "

"Niendar!"

"Bite her hand, fingers, ear, pull her hair — something!"

"DETENTION!"

But no one heard McGonagall's scold. Suddenly the crowd was on its feet, screaming yet again. Both Selene and Kaltag were stiff on their fins, shooting after a silvery blur. They circled the Scepter and flattened themselves on their boards when pulled into an abrupt plunge.

"They're over the stands . . . back over the field . . . right over the commentator's station! Oh, catch the bloody thing already!" Harry squeezed the handle of his flag so tight in excitement it broke. They were neck and neck. Selene suddenly pulled back her elbow and took aim. "Oh! Nice try, Magnus!"

Kaltag dodged her elbow, which left him open for the catch. "YOW! Smythe gets the Scepter! PARAFFIN WINS! PARAFFIN WINS! I JUST WON TWENTY DEKA!"

Harry cheered with the crowd as Paraffin did a victory lap around the pitch. The field was bathed in students as several houses poured onto the grounds to congratulate them. Hermione sighed in relief beside Harry. "Oh, thank goodness! It's over."

Harry shook his head and followed them onto the pitch, where the Sliatckx Honor was presented to the exhausted, battered players. Thetis was surprisingly among the crowd of students, beaming at her house team as Gilliam passed the title of Captain to the redheaded prefect. Raucous cheers met his declaration.

"Expect one hell of a party tonight," Seamus shouted in Harry's ear. Ron nodded eagerly; Harry simply laughed at Hermione's frown of disapproval.

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" . . . and then he whooshed right by me! I thought I was done for! There I was, hanging on my broom with one hand, ready to sacrifice myself for our house . . . ." Ron passionately kept several witches on the edge. Harry shook his head, swigging the rest of his butterbeer. Across the room, a fifth year shrunk into a toddler and scurried around the room to the delight of the crowd.

It was well after midnight, and the celebration was still in full swing. Despite Hermione's demands to retire, the Gryffindors continued to

party and ignored her threats. She sat huffily by Harry, glaring in the general direction of the room.

Harry airily laughed. "You have to be the least spirited Gryffindor I've ever met, Hermione." He grunted from another unnecessary slap on the back. He was starting to lose feeling in his upper back, around his shoulders from getting cuffed so much.

The witch smiled at this. "Never let it be said that I don't try." Harry began to smile, but another smack on his shoulder and loud comment (which got the revelers to pause and toast him for the tenth time that night) left him glowering.

"I'm not the only one who should be assaulted tonight." Hermione stifled a giggle at his grumble.

"Well, you're the only one they can get to tonight." Harry furrowed his brow in befuddlement. "He went to bed pretty early. Sometime between the second round of butterbeers, Exploding Snap, and Ron's first tale."

Harry nodded, his eyes heavy. Sleep didn't sound so bad right now. He slouched deeper into the couch. "Just like him to leave me with the tab." Hermione made a noise of amusement and quickly scoffed as a few Paraffins tried to reenact his battle with Summerby — horribly.

Yawning, Harry thought he'd rest his eyes for a bit. It wouldn't be long before the party was over. And besides, he wanted to wait for the batch of Cauldron Cakes Seamus went off to get.

Clutching his empty bottle and vaguely hearing of Ron's daring save of the quaffle from corrosive grass, Harry found he couldn't escape the lure of sleep for long.

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Harry wiped the sweat pouring from his forehead, threatening to fall into the boiling cauldron before him.

"Chop!" he heard a distant voice order. "Chop it right!" Several knives diced and chopped and clammy hands tossed ingredients into cauldrons bubbling madly.

Glancing around the fuzzy room, Harry realized he was in Potions.

Only, he wasn't making a potion. No one was. Not with these ingredients, anyway.

"Harry! You heard him!" Hermione's dithering voice brought him out of his reverie. "Chop! Chop, Harry!" She minced her carrots. "He'll fail us if this soup isn't right!" Beside her, Ron made a fearful noise and dabbed his eyes, tearing up from the juicy onions.

In front of the room Snape was screaming in Lavender's ear how she 'must chop!' Malfoy was biting his lip in concentration as he shredded carrots. Everyone was chopping, slicing, dicing, and making soup. Snape repeatedly hopped around telling everyone how they 'must chop!'

"Harry!" Hermione poked him with a spoon. "Chop correctly before he fails you! You heard him — chop!"

Grabbing a tarnished knife, Harry set about chopping his carrots. He wasn't sure why, but he had a bizarre urge to chop.

Snape swept by as his knife 'thwack thwack thwacked' through the carrot, onto the table and chopping.

"Potter's not chopping correctly!" Malfoy sneered from across the room. Snape suddenly towered over him.

"Potter!" He spat, adjusting his overlarge, puffed up hat with matching apron. "You are not chopping right! Insolence!" He seized the knife and snatched the carrot from the Gryffindor's hand and proceeded to chop it correctly, spitting in Harry's face. "You must chop with perfection! We are making the perfect soup and who else but you has to ruin it by not chopping properly? Sixty points from Gryffindor!"

Harry wanted to protest, but he couldn't speak against him. Not that Snape could hear him over the excessive chopping anyway. "This is how we chop! Like this! Like this! See Potter? This is how the perfect soup is made. By excellence in chopping! Even your small mind can comprehend the exact art that is chopping, though by the looks of this, I have strong reservations!"

Snape bared his yellow teeth, his focus on chopping, hat sliding down his forehead. After beginning the second carrot, he slammed the knife on the table, glaring at Harry. Ron jumped at the loud bang, but proceeded to furiously wipe his eyes and slice more onions. "Now, see to it that you chop properly, Potter! Ten more points from Gryffindor for wasting my time!" With that, he fixed his falling puff-hat and stalked to the next table.

"You see?" Bristled Hermione as she added celery and Ron, beans. "You weren't chopping right. I told you to chop right! Didn't I, Ron?"

"Yeah, mate. You didn't chop right." He mopped his runny eyes again. "You've got to chop right."

Harry's forehead wrinkled more. "But . . . why?"

Hermione theatrically gasped, looking horrified. "Why? Why? We have to! We must chop! This is the age of Chopping! It's the Chopping Revolution! Didn't you read Hogwarts, A History? Chopping must be done to ensure survival and worth!" She seemed to stifle a sob while adding water and armadillo bile.

Harry scrubbed his temple, his sweat mixing with the potage. Snape still yelled how important it was to chop

He paused to watch Pansy throw in a dash of salt and some doxies, and Malfoy shook some unicorn scrapings over his cauldron. Hermione dug into his ribs with a ladle and a withering look. "Chop!" She insisted while dropping live flobberworms one by one into his cauldron. "If we don't, we fail!"

Harry didn't want to chop. But something inside him was bursting forth, telling him to chop. He needed to chop!

"No." He muttered to himself, stilling his knife over the third carrot. Hermione scooped up the bits and dumped them over the flobberworms.

"Don't stop chopping, Harry." But Harry narrowed his eyes and pushed the carrot away.

"I don't want to." He defied softly. "I don't want to chop anymore."



Hermione froze over the cauldron, as did Ron from rubbing his moist cheeks. Snape paused, mid -chop, glowering at Harry. Then, the chopping came to an abrupt halt as everyone stared at the rebellious Gryffindor.

"What," spat Snape venomously, "did you say, Potter?"

The black-haired wizard gripped the knife tighter. "I said," he inwardly berated himself as his voice cracked amid the inward proclamations of 'chop! You must chop!' "I . . . don't . . . want . . . to chop."

No one said a word. Even the cauldrons seemed to stop gurgling. Beside him, Hermione whispered 'no' over and over under her breath, mumbling 'he should have chopped, never stop chopping . . . '

Snape's eyes darkened even more if possible. His pale lips twitched. Harry clenched the slippery blade cautiously. The potions master smirked briefly before he addressed the class.

"Kill him."

Bodies lunged, knives and carrots and bezoars in hand. Harry shirked them all as his class turned against him in a frenzy, some foaming at the mouth, others screaming themselves hoarse. Some Ravenclaw slashed at his face, while a Gryffindor clawed at his legs. Startled from his shock, Harry kicked and swung at them, not caring whether his fist hit carrots or noses. The voice in his head ordering him to chop was now purring new commands into his ear.

Kill.

Kill them all.

They are not worthy; not without you.

Elbowing some Slytherin, Harry swung the knife at a hulking figure, catching him in the side. He swung left and caught an unsuspecting person through the chest. Harry kept swing his arms, squeezing necks and slitting them at the same alarming rate, hacking through faces he'd never seen, stepping on bodies that meant nothing to him.

Gone was the potion's classroom and here now an open village, ripe for the slaughtering. The people ran and stumbled in their long raiment, but still met the end of Harry's blade. Necks yielded to the crush of his fingers, screams torn from them, eyes fearing his very appearance, and still Harry advanced.

Kill them.

They are not worthy.

His nails tore skin and clothes, bones snapped, heads rent from shoulders — and yet Harry marched through the red pastures to seek more game. The hunt was afoot, and the prey, scattered.

What's a shepherd without sheep...to slay

Cleaving an unworthy man in half, Harry chuckled deep in his throat as he set fire to the once sleepy hamlet, his sword swaying to and fro. The sweet music of his future victims' wails flooded his senses, causing him to growl in satisfaction. Another fell upon his sword as they tried to stagger away. He spared one, a gallant muscled figure, club in hand, barring his path and prepared to run him through.

Instead, Harry smirked and thrust himself on his sword, surging through time and space as his last host fell . . . until he was looking down on his old quarry. Small, bleeding and pale with death; not at all resembling this weak-willed one. He bobbed his large head. This body would do for now. He picked up the fallen sword, and dropped the club from his thick-fingered hand.

Wiping the blood from his sword, Harry inhaled deeply, pleasing the beast within. It had been a long time since he'd had this delicacy: blood and souls. He rightly deserved it after all this time.

But now was not the time to dwell on such things. After all, the hunt was just beginning. He grinned his feral grin and sliced cleanly through another, and another, their shocked faces blissfully nameless.

A chopping revolution indeed.

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Unnaturally long fingers gripped his wand and jabbed it into the head of the skull. The portly man before him could not muffle his pathetic yelp of pain as the mark blackened, sizzling on his skin. He removed his wand and shoved the useless oaf away from him, moving back into the shadows.

Almost immediately, soft cracks burst through the air as his most faithful gathered around him, white masks barely visible in the darkness. "My lord." They acknowledged, bowing to press their lips three times to the hem of his robe. Finally they stood patiently, waiting for instruction. The lump on the floor quivered in fear before crawling to the door and sealing it shut.

Five of his devoted faced him, eyes lowered to the ground in uncharacteristic submission for men and women of power. He leered. "The hour is soon upon us. The first strike will be thrown." The five nodded in agreement. "We are close. I doubt even that fool knows how near we are." Thin lips stretched in a smirk.

"I only need three of you." He gestured to the strongest. "You will accompany me at all times. The rest of you will take the others through the village." Again, they wordlessly nodded. "Bellatrix."

The smaller, thinner, but deadlier of them all stepped forward in reliable impatience. "My lord?"

He smiled at her, bringing his bony fingers to her covered face. "Bella," she shivered as he sighed her name. He felt an abnormal urge to recoil, but it went overlooked. "You will lead them. You have your orders." The sorcerer withdrew his pallid hand.

She nodded fervently, not quite whimpering from the loss of contact. "Summon those on hand. Tell them we move again at dawn." The inner circle mumbled their accordance. Again, his pale face tautened in a genuine, if not fanatical sneer.

"To Hogsmeade, my loyal. To Hogsmeade."

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A/N: Ooookay. Maybe that was a bit gory. Nevertheless, read and review please! I want to know how close you are to the mystery (evil

chuckle). The Extended Version of this chapter is on Yahoo if you're curious; it's only a few words and sentences and conversations longer. Don't forget to visit the website to get my response to your reviews and questions. I do respond to them; it gives me a chance to rant and we can't pass that up now can we? Read and review!

A/N 2: This is just an off-topic thing, but to any military folk out there: if your rank is Lieutenant Colonel, am I obligated to call you Lt. Col.? Or just Lieutenant or Colonel? Thanks.

A/N 3: The next chapter should be shorter...I think. Never know when the imagination'll just run off on you.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Wild Side (Abridged Version)

Harry darted his eyes away from the head table for the ninth time that morning.

Dumbledore was still glancing at him over his half-moon spectacles.

Harry sighed deeply into his toast. He knew. Dumbledore knew.

"Harry?"

"He knows." He simply replied. Hermione's temple furrowed.

"Did you tell him yet?"

Harry paused before, "No."

"Harry!" she scolded quietly. He threw her an annoyed look to match his mood. Ron just grinned merrily.

"Since you'd just burst if you don't know," he narrowed his eyes at her startled look, "I was planning on owling him." Hermione frowned.

"Wouldn't it be easier just to go to his office?"

"No."

"Or — "

"No."

"Maybe if you'd — "

"No."

At this, both prefects looked puzzled. "What's with you and him anyway, mate? He hasn't called you up in a while." Harry grunted, forking a sausage. "Something happen?"

The black-haired wizard shook his head with a shrug. "Dumbledore doesn't tell me anything anymore."

Glancing quickly at the head table, he noticed the headmaster animatedly talking to Kenward. He wasn't looking at Harry this time around, but his wild hand motions were strangely generalized on the Gryffindor table. "You have to tell Dumbledore." Hermione spoke firmly. "If Voldemort is attacking Hogsmeade, he'll need to know."

"Yeah," Ron added as he swallowed his food. "If he's as close as Hogsmeade, who knows when he'll get to the school!" Hermione shushed him as several students looked in their direction. Harry wished he'd have owled Dumbledore before he told Ron and Hermione this morning.

He nodded. "Of course I'll tell him. Just not face to face."

It wasn't that Harry had anything against the old wizard, but he just didn't want to be bothered. And by bothered, he meant questioned:

'How are you doing, my boy? Lemon drop? Oh, a dream you say? Oh, dear. That's dreadful. I will notify the Order to be on alert. Now Harry: how are you? Is there anything you want to tell me? Anything? Anything at all? Are you sure? Positive? You are sure? I insist, have a lemon drop! Are you sure? Seriously?'

He knew Dumbledore wouldn't prod that much for information. Deep down he knew the headmaster would back off at the first wall he hit, but he didn't want to take any chances.

But he had to admit: nowadays, it seemed Dumbledore was giving him much needed space. Maybe too much space. Harry wasn't sure whether that was good or bad. "Hand me a quill."

Hermione hesitantly handed over quill and parchment to the wizard, frowning. "I'm not going to see him unless he demands for me, Hermione. Wipe that look off your face."

She either ignored him or didn't hear him.

Tapping the quill, Harry decided to keep it to the point.

Headmaster,

I had a vision last night. Voldemort will be attacking Hogsmeade soon, but I don't know how soon. Just thought you should know to prepare in advance.

- Harry

Checking to make sure all bases were covered, Harry handed the quill back to a watchful Hermione. He muttered a goodbye and stood from his seat, walking toward the double doors under the scrutiny of six eyes.

Harry plodded through the morning latecomers to the breezy Owlery. Several hurried birds flew both ways through the many windows as they returned from their deliveries. Thankfully, the Owlery was clear of anyone else. He felt odd buzzing through his body, as if he had a million thoughts and feelings that weren't his own.

It wasn't until a light weight settled on his shoulder that he remembered he could read the owls' emotions. Hedwig gave a soft hoot in greeting as she nipped his ear. She was particularly pleased today; probably because she hadn't delivered anything in a while, he guessed. "Girl," he greeted, patting her softly.

With a curiosity-spiked hoot, the snowy owl hopped onto a nearby perch and began pecking at Harry's pockets, earning a laugh. "You're entirely too nosy — or beaky, rather," he lightly scolded pulling out the scraps of bacon he'd saved for her.

After Hedwig cheerfully indulged, he folded the parchment and handed it to her. "To Dumbledore, Hedwig. Don't wait for a reply unless he wants to." With a dutiful hoot, she was out the window. Harry left the Owlery and headed to the tower.

Upon entering the common room, Harry realized he should've gone for a long walk instead. The room was stifling due to the several bodies strewn about the area. Beings and Entities and Hogwarts students covered the floor with limbs, books and paper, all talking quite loud and exchanging information.

He'd almost forgot they were testing next week. He found that rather incredible, seeing as how many of the seventh years were subject to frequent breakdowns this week.

"Better here than out there," Hermione startled him as she came through the portrait, Ron in tow. "The library's packed."

"Um, if you hadn't noticed . . . this isn't any better." Ron objected. Harry readily nodded as they maneuvered around the scattered bodies to find a free spot. Miraculously, the table near the hearth was unoccupied.

As the three sat, Harry borrowed books and parchment from Ron and settled down to get some much-needed work done. Though with the constant chatter of the testing students, Harry very much doubted it.

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"Hellfire and hounds! What's a dokimasia again?" Harry rolled his eyes as Yorick shouted for assistance yet again in the last three hours. "Dokimasia, dokimasia," He mumbled. "Er, let down yer hair?"

Harry snorted as someone hurled a book at him. "Oi! Yer not gettin' this back, yeh right plonker!" Shouted the Being.

Ron and Hermione worked quietly still, with Hermione on her half-completed Potions essay and Ron subtly looking on her paper. But Harry found it quite hard to concentrate when the conversations from the Paradors were on anything but their studies.

" . . . So papa says if we pass with high marks, he'll let us go to Mykonos this summer." Hermione absently nodded at Nikola's rambling. "Oh! The perfect tan rests on my getting Alphas on these exams!"

Starbuck grunted from near her legs. "Your theatrics give Dionysus a run for his money . . ."

" . . . What are the ingredients in a Forgetfulness Potion?" There was silence. Apparently, the other fifth year forgot.

Harry picked up his quill to try to write for Potions, but the discussions seemed to get if not more distracting, certainly more out there.



" . . . Going after my kouros early summer. I'm just saying it's cool," Icarus began, noisily shifting papers on the floor. "But creepy, is all."

"And you want me to experience this because . . . ?"

"Are you going to Gymnasium this summer?"

"Are you serious?" Kaltag exclaimed, glaring at Thanos. "Keep one leg forward and smooth the sand of your temptation? One visit was traumatizing enough! Three words, Theion: public dressing rooms."

"So you're not going?" The redhead glared at Thanos. "That's a 'no', then."

There was a considerable pause, followed by, "Why won't you — "

"Would you just drop it?" The Being's eyes glowed a fierce orange-red. The subsequent hush was very tense. Though Harry swore he heard Nikola mutter, "What's got his chiton in a twist . . . ?"

Ron finally gave up trying to cheat and doodled on the side of his book. He paused as Harry was scratching out another sentence. "Did you tell Dumbledore?" He whispered it low enough, but Hermione sharply looked up, eyeing him expectantly.

Harry had to admit he felt a bit annoyed with their constant prying. Didn't they trust him enough to report on something as drastic as an attack on Hogsmeade? "Yes," he all but hissed, somewhat pleased by their shocked faces. "I told him everything: the dream, my fancies, body weight, hopes for the future and favorite color, if you must know."

"Oh." Came Ron's response.

The noise level quickly rose again, but Hermione angrily quieted them with a threat. With a frustrated sigh, Harry pushed his book away and dropped his quill. Ron looked up from his doodling with a questioning glance, but he waved him off. "M'fine."

The keeper shrugged, sketching a foul picture of some sort. As Harry rubbed his temple, he noticed Hermione's familiar exasperated huff. "You need to study."

"Study? Study what?" He argued. "We're not the ones testing."

She didn't back down. "We will be in the same position next year."

"That's right. Next year. Not next week." Ron emphasized, looking at Harry to back him. "Why can't we just take a break until then?"

Harry could tell without looking at her that she was frowning. "At least focus! You'll both regret that when you're scrambling to study. Don't come to me when you need help." Harry rubbed his forehead, hoping they'd end this soon; he was starting to get a headache from their arguing.

"And why would we? You'd probably be cozy with Boot, anyway." Muttered the peeved Weasley. The common room started as a book was slammed shut.

Darting his gaze up, Harry spotted Hermione glaring daggers at the ginger-haired wizard. "What's that supposed to mean?" She hissed, her brown eyes a mixture of emotion.

Ron looked uncharacteristically smug as he eyed her down. He indifferently replied, "You're smart: figure it out. Besides, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what you're up to — "

"Oh really! What am I up to then?"

Ron deflated somewhat before he scowled. "You know."

Hermione seemed to anger even more at his casualness. Harry wondered if that were even possible. "I know? Of course I know! I've been studying! Something you should try for once!"

"Studying'? Is that what they call snogging in the library?"

They were both on their feet shouting at each other, the common room staring in avid fascination. Both were turning quite red and their fists were balled and shaking.

Sighing in displeasure, Harry shut his book and rubbed his forehead. "All right." He attempted. Hermione and Ron were still hurling accusations. "That's enough."

Still, they continued. "Maybe if you'd try more — "

"Don't blame me, it's you who's — "

"Me? How dare you even — "

"ENOUGH ALREADY!" Harry slammed the book on the table and stood. The common room — as well as his best friends — fell quiet. Few Celestials grumbled at the disruption; Gilliam gave him a nasty look. Ron smirked at Hermione, folding his arms and quietly snickered.

"Harry, can you believe her? Honestly!"

"You're the one who's unbelievable! Tell him, Harry! Tell him he's — "

"Both of you shut up!" He snapped. He was satisfied by their startled looks. Immediately Hermione looked worried and Harry brusquely shrugged her off. "I dunno who you two think you're fooling."

They looked shocked. Harry was angry they were even surprised.

Hermione's eyes softened. "Harry, we're sorry."

"Yeah, mate," Ron joined in apologetically, scratching his bright hair. "We were just — "

"Don't apologize," Harry held up a hand and clenched his fists. "Just don't — don't talk! Fix this, whatever it is, because it's giving me more headaches than Voldemort." He delighted in Ron's undignified squeak.

The Gryffindor prefects had the audacity (yet again) to look shocked. "Oh, don't give me those looks, you — !" Harry grit his teeth and growled, unable to finish for fear of unleashing his anger. He pushed out of his chair and stomped between books and struck-silent bodies to get to the portrait hole.

He needed to get out of there fast.

With a heavy sigh, Harry trudged out the greenhouses to blow off steam. Between Ron and Hermione, goodness knows he deserved it.

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A week later, Harry wondered what on earth possessed him to study in the common room again.

But he could honestly say he could feel the pressure the professors experienced; yesterday he'd done a review for the Defense Associations and was pelted with questions and back to back demonstrations for the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. takers. He'd never done so many spells in one sitting! By the time Harry had hit the pillow, he was asleep, robes and all.

Today, the common room was packed, as per usual these last few days. Luckily for him, Hermione was tied up with Neville in the library after her prefect meeting. She and Ron had not spoken of the incident from last time, at least not around him. Though he noticed they were noticeably warmer towards each other.

Tonight was oddly quieter than the last few evenings, though it was the eve of the exams for Aripedes' sixth and seventh years. Harry was quite sure they'd all be in an uproar, but figured they had taken their ranting and panicking to the library. Madam Pince could do with the shouting matches and breakdowns; her attitude certainly deserved it.

He looked up from his Care of Magical Creatures book as the portrait opened to admit Ron. "Whew! Thought McGonagall'd never let us go." He threw his bag aside and pulled out a glossy magazine with the Holyhead Harpies on the front, looping about. "Got the new edition of Quaffles And . . . . Want a look?"

Harry shut his book with a relieved sigh and nodded. "Before Hermione gets here." They shared a laugh and thumbed through the periodical before Hermione's presence forced them to hide it.

She dropped her books on the table and blew a strand of hair off her face. "The library — a zoo! I've never seen the shelves so messy! Madam Pince looked close to tears!"

"Serves her right." He heard Ron mutter as they grudgingly opened their books.

" . . . Neville and I could barely get anything done, and it took us ages to sign out one book, Madam Pince was closing it down before any more students got in. Don't forget Ron, we're patrolling at nine tonight." The keeper groaned in reply.

Hermione made a contemplative noise before covering her parchment from Ron's wandering eyes. "By the way, how are your lessons faring . . . ?" Harry briefly summarized what he'd learned in the greenhouses and got impressed looks from his friends. Ron looked miffed actually, but it was more than likely due to the fact they were on the subject of 'that ginger-haired git' or Kaltag, as he was known to everyone else.

Speaking of which, he'd just crossed the room toward the portrait hole alongside Icarus. In fact, they were moving at a rather brisk pace and their eyes darted around suspiciously. Intrigued, Harry set his book aside, gaining Ron and Hermione's attention. "I'm . . . just going to ask him when our next lesson will be."

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "Hurry back. You've still got two essays and I've got to check them before rounds." Ron huffed and took the time during Hermione's distraction to look over her shoulder to jot down more sentences.

Striding quickly to catch the prefects, Harry stepped over a group of fifth years and stumbled behind the two. They were in some sort of hurry. "Oi, hang on. Wait!"

The Beings halted with their hands on the portrait. Harry was taken aback. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Maybe." It seemed that was the only answer he was going to get.

"I just . . . wanted a word," he sorted the words in his head so he wouldn't reveal anything. "About that plant project in the greenhouses?"

Kaltag's eyes flickered in understanding and he nodded. "Last day of exams, next Wednesday. If that's all? All right, later!" At the speed

they exited the portrait hole, Harry could definitely tell something was afoot. He followed them out before the portrait door slammed.

The pair was halfway down the hall when he spotted them. "Where are you going?" They paused, turning to face him. Even from the distance he could see Kaltag roll his eyes.

"Last-minute swot."

Harry raised a brow. "This late? And without books?" Icarus glared at Kaltag. "Won't you get caught?"

"We're cramming with other prefects," the black Being took over. "Just over at the library."

Harry resisted the urge to grin knowingly. "The library's closed." He nearly laughed at their looks of exasperation. "What are you really up to?"

"Cripes, what are you — an Auror?" Icarus flared. Kaltag gave the Gryffindor an impatient look.

Harry wasn't fazed. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?" The Beings looked at each other sparingly, their eyes locked as if in silent conversation. An agreement seemed to pass between the two and Icarus jerked his head down the hall. Harry warily followed the two to the seventh floor and watched as Icarus paced hastily before the blank wall before he was shoved into the Room.

He could smell the stale cleaning solution and thought his hand brushed a feather duster. Someone cursed as they knocked into a mop or broom. He couldn't help but wryly remark, "This is best you could do?"

"Don't get shirty, Potter."

There was some movement to his right before a spout of flames shot out of the darkness to light a half-melted candle. Glowing orange-gold eyes shimmered back to the troubled blue of Kaltagonus. Harry's brow flattened and his arms crossed. "Spill it."

"DAFT."

The wizard glared at Icarus. "No, I'm not." He rolled his eyes.

"We're off to play DAFT. Dark Forest Tag?" He shot him a look, which Harry couldn't read. Analyzing the word, Harry merely nodded.

"Yeah. You'd have to be daft to fool around in the forest." He received black looks for that one.

Kaltag sighed, pinching his nose. "We've been studying for six years. We're entitled to some enjoyment now and then."

The Gryffindor's brow creased. "And the Dark Forest? What, the dancing girls couldn't make it so this is the next best thing?"

Icarus exhaled through his nose. "You don't really listen to that hot air Dumbledore says about it? We can handle our own, yeah?" Harry gave him a funny look.

"Besides," Kaltag took over, "It's tradition. The night before every exam, we sneak out of the dorms for a bit of fun." He laughed a laugh that was overcome with nostalgia. "If we were at Academy, we'd already be doing rounds at Bacchus'."

"Yeah, we would."

Harry distantly marveled what it would be like to slip away from Hogwarts to the Three Broomsticks. He wasn't sure if Rosmerta would report him or not, but it sounded appealing. "But this is what we'll settle for. We've done it a couple of times already."

He blurted out, stunned, "Here? And you haven't been caught?"

The Beings gave him obvious looks. "You seriously want us to answer that?"

"Anyway," Icarus resumed, "Sorry we haven't invited you. It was a new thing, and we couldn't have anyone hold us back. The more we had, the more likely it would have got us into trouble."

Harry nodded at the logic. "And now?"

"We've got lookouts," Kaltag supplied, leaning against the wall. "All about the castle making sure the professors and Filch are kept busy. You know, expendables. They don't mind getting in trouble."

"Sure," Harry barely snapped. "You don't mind sending them there."

The redhead had the nerve to shrug indifferently. "What can I say? We're prefects. They gave us badges to manipulate." At that, Harry had to scoff. "Anyway, Harry: for some reason I like you. So I hope I won't have to regret what I'm about to do." Harry suddenly felt apprehensive. "Come tonight."

Harry blinked. "To DAFT?" The prefects nodded.

"Whaddya say? You ready to join the dark side?" Icarus drawled with a smirk, breaking into his musing.

Harry considered his options. He could go back to the common room, forget they'd had this conversation and listen to Hermione lecture on marks and good essays.

On the other hand . . . it was tempting. The prospect of breaking dozens of school rules with prefects no less . . . the offer certainly was enticing.

But Hermione and Ron! If she found out, she'd throw a fit! And Ron, he doubted the keeper was invited. He would've been mad about it, reminding him every chance he got. But they didn't know, and if he didn't go, he'd be safer and quieter and more of the usual, buried in his homework and diverting Hermione's attention so Ron could copy off her work. Same old, same old.

Was it really worth it: losing points and detentions — or worse: expulsion? There was a sudden little voice in his head, pulling him back. It sounded vaguely like Hermione. And quite annoying, really.

"But Hermione and Ron, I don't think I can — "

"Got it covered. They're not going, and Kiden's making sure they're kept away on their rounds."

The wizard bit his lip. "Hermione would say this is a bad idea."



Kaltag smirked. "That's why Hermione isn't invited."

A thought suddenly occurred to Harry. "Who is invited?"

"A privileged lot," Icarus held up fingers. "Select guests, whoever strikes our fancy, really. Stavros, Corner, Davies, Xu — "

" — Selene, Izzy, the Neptunes — "

" — Proteus, Justin, Ogilvy — "

"But . . . those are mostly," he feebly answered, going over the mentioned names again. "Prefects."

"You didn't think we're all good all the time? Trust me: every prefect has a wild side." Harry had a fleeting image of Hermione carelessly throwing her books aside and rallying them for a quick snoop hours after curfew. Wild side . . . yeah, right. It still didn't help his decision.

"Thought I heard Malfoy was coming."

"Yeah," Icarus replied, clearly unimpressed. "To get us in trouble."

The redhead yawned, raising a shoulder. "Well, at least he's coming, right?" Harry must've been rather silent in his musing. "Come on! Are you always going to let Hermione and Weasley make decisions for you? Harry Potter — Boy-Who-Lived to be the Mindless Minion to his friends? Giving them the spotlight and backstage?"

A considerable silence followed as Harry churned the words in his brain. Part of him wanted to burst out of the room and tell Ron, tell him about this crazy stunt they were pulling with prefects, no less, that was risking expulsion. It was so funny, it was beyond laughable.

And then there would be Hermione, who would have to be clued in as well, because it would look suspicious if they unexpectedly went missing under her nose. Hermione and Ron were brilliant, and he'd want them at his side for everything.

But . . .

There were times when he needed to make his own decisions and mistakes. There were times when he needed to separate himself

from the 'trio' and be 'just Harry'. He loved his friends, fiercely and dearly . . .

. . . But he had to admit they weren't always going to be together.

"You in?" Icarus quietly asked.

Harry turned away and faced where he thought the common room would be. He could almost see Ron peeking over Hermione's shoulder to copy Flitwick's essay.

Fun indeed.

"Yeah." He firmly nodded. "I'm in."

The smirks spread across the Celestials' faces. "Ah, Potter's got a backbone." Kaltag sneered.

Icarus inclined his head. "Midnight. Bring your broom. Follow the owl."

Harry's expression faltered from 'what-in-the-name-of-Merlin-have-I-got-myself-into' to bewilderment. "Owl? What owl — ?" But the candle was blown out and the door creaked open. The identical rushes of air past him signaled the swift exit of the prefects and Harry was left in the darkness, questioning his sanity.

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Harry steeled himself to reenter the tower. As soon as he entered, he would be lying through his teeth to his best friends. One thing was certain: he had to get in and out of the common room escaping their notice.

Entering, he noticed Ron and Hermione in the same area, glancing up to greet him. "What took so long?" Ron inquired over Hermione's shoulder.

Harry carded his fingers through his locks and shrugged, smiling crookedly. "They were in a hurry. Late night study group. Caught them halfway to the library."

Hermione frowned and Harry quickly realized his mistake. "The library's closed about now. They would know that."

"Mm," Harry inwardly attempted to throw together an excuse. "Yeah, they're meeting in front of it and going somewhere exclusive. Hard to find a place that isn't a circus round here."

He sighed in relief when she seemed to accept his answer. "That's true." They both started packing their books up. "We're off to our rounds. You've still got McGonagall's essay, remember?"

Harry promised to get right on it. "Actually," they paused expectantly as he spoke. He feigned a yawn. "I'm quite tired and my head's starting to bother me. No, not that." He quickly answered their alarmed looks. "Don't come looking for me if I'm not here when you're back. I'll probably be in bed, then."

Breathing a sigh of relief, he raced up to the dormitory and broke through the door. The room was thankfully empty as he made it to his trunk. The wizard sifted through old books and his uncle's holey brown socks to pull out his Cloak and the Marauder's Map. It wouldn't hurt to be prepared, and he figured it was safer to get it now, than while his friends were hovering over his every move.

When he returned to the common room, he tried to start his homework for McGonagall, but found himself too anxious to concentrate. Was he really doing this? Sneaking out to the forest to play tag? It seemed so childish as he mulled it over in his mind. He really hoped he wouldn't regret this, or he would definitely be in for it.

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Sneaking past Ron and Hermione proved more difficult than he'd envisioned. First, they had finished their rounds much earlier than expected and went on to talk on and on about how many students they (or rather Hermione) had sent back to their common rooms. Hermione almost seemed heartbroken that she had turned the studious test-takers away.

Quarter after eleven, the two hadn't shown signs of exhaustion. Hermione had come down on him for not finishing his work and refused to help him. Harry really didn't care because his mind was on other things, such as how to avoid being caught and expelled.

The thoughts had pretty much taken up his evening, homework be damned.

When they hadn't given up twenty minutes 'til, Harry had had enough. Feigning exhaustion, he widely yawned and made up an excuse to head up to the dormitory. It had worked for a while, but when he'd got halfway up the stairs to pull out his Cloak, Ron's voice came up behind him. "Good one, mate. I was sure she would've kept us until everything was done. I swear, she's turning more into McGonagall by the minute . . . !"

Harry resisted the urge to bang his head against the wall and grudgingly replied, "Yeah. Scary." He led the way up into the sixth year dorms.

"I'm knackered." Ron yawned, popping his bones. "Good thing we're not testing, yeah?"

Harry made a noncommittal noise as he sat heavily on his bed. He made a show of pulling out his nightclothes and tossing his things around. Glancing at the dorm clock, he noted it was quarter 'til. It was now or never. He yawned quite convincingly. "Night, Ron. I'm so tired I can't even think straight."

It was a miracle Ron seemed to understand, though his brow furrowed a bit. "All right. You do look a bit peaky, mate. Night." Harry absently nodded and drew the drapes around his bed, waiting silently.

When the door to the lavatory closed, Harry slipped on his Invisibility Cloak and peeked through the small gaps in the hangings to make sure he was alone. The only noise came from Neville, and his loud snoring was enough to mask whatever sound Harry could've made while escaping. He knew he should've waited until Ron was asleep, but the hour was nearing and he was too wound-up.

Tiptoeing down the stairs was easy; he just had to make sure he didn't trip over the Cloak's hem. The next task, however: getting through the sea of bodies without giving himself away. It almost made him turn around and return to his bed.

Hermione was still at the table, now quizzing Nikola on Floras. Taking a deep but silent breath, Harry stealthily maneuvered around,

between and over the Celestials and O.W.L./N.E.W.T. students, making sure the Cloak didn't brush anyone.

He was inwardly relieved when he reached the portrait hole and did not have to wait long before several seventh years poured in. With a last glance at Hermione, Harry clung to the Cloak and slid past the portrait.

Surprisingly, the corridors were empty. It appeared Hermione had done a good job threatening the students. Whispering the phrase to activate the Marauder's Map, Harry kept his eyes on both the parchment and the corridor vigilantly. He didn't want any nasty surprises springing up and blowing his cover, Invisibility Cloak or no.

Other than spotting Flitwick waddling around the fourth floor and the lights flickering in the Defense room, his journey to the entrance hall was uneventful. He looked around the hall for any sign of an owl or spell, but found none. How was he supposed to know where to go if he couldn't find the owl?

He had just pulled out his wand to cast the Point Me spell when he heard flapping overhead. His eyes darted upward to see a flutter of white before a soft hoot met his ears. How'd they get Hedwig? He inwardly questioned.

Harry made a quick dash to the broom shed to seize his Firebolt and rushed after his awaiting owl. He was running late! Hedwig continued to fly swiftly along the edge of the forest, as if knowing Harry was pressed for time. The Gryffindor held tight to the front of the Cloak, not caring if he was noisy and it flapped at the bottom revealing disembodied feet.

Finally, he spotted a small gathering of darkness, a good distance away from Hagrid's purview. Hedwig flew past to bat his head affectionately before soaring back to the Owlery.

From the shadows and fog of the forest, the shapes turned out to be the students, all puttering around the forest's edge; in all actuality, Harry hadn't expected this many students to be invited.

This was, by no means, a small gathering. But he had to admit, the dark cloaks worn by the wizards and Celestials were a smart move.

Amid this darkness, a professor would have to know what they were looking for to spot them.

When he reached the side of Hagrid's hut, he pulled off the Cloak and stuffed it in his pocket along with the map. He was about to stride out to the gathering, his Firebolt clutched in hand, when he heard a slight rustle in the forest. Freezing in his tracks, Harry squinted to peer into the forest. He saw a flash of movement, but shrugged it off to a frightened animal or the wind. It had started to pick up, anyway.

His appearance startled the others into silence, and they stared at him appraisingly. "I suppose he'll do," A haughty voice grumbled. "He is a decent flyer."

Harry bristled at Zacharias' bored tone. Who invited him? Ignoring the boy for now, he studied the assembly of rule-breakers: Icarus was talking to Justin, Lisa Turpin and Mandy Brocklehurst, all of whom seemed to throw a dark robe over their pajamas. Michael Corner nodded at him by Roger Davies and a group of giggling Entities and witches.

There were several other Celestials he'd only heard of, and if the shiny badges pinned to their fronts stood for anything, it meant they were prefects. He was really surprised when he spotted Tam Xu and Isabella Lancaster from Voltaire, a couple of no-nonsense prefects, or so he thought.

Someone brushed by him and pressed a bottle of warm liquid into his hand. He eyed it, not being able to make anything out in the darkness besides an eerie tawny glow pulsing steadily at the bottom. "Don't drink that yet," a familiar tone warned. "Not until the toast."

His brow shot into his fringe. "Ginny! What — but Ron, and the O.W.L. and — "

She struck him with a skeptical look. "You really think I'd miss this? Besides, O.W.L.s start Thursday. I've got plenty of time."

Harry dumbly nodded, wondering exactly how red Ron would turn if he found out about this. "You a lookout?"

Ginny's face scrunched, affronted as she shook her head and gestured to her broom. "Goodness no. Invited by Selene."

"When are we starting? What're we waiting for, the professors to catch us?" Davies growled.

"Yeah, it's quarter after. No one else'll be coming." Someone remarked. An agreeable murmur spread throughout the crowd. A peeved sigh brought their attention to Icarus.

"All right, then. I guess we can start this. Bottoms up, then we — oh." Harry thought they'd been caught at his abrupt pause. But after glancing over his shoulder, he spotted two indistinguishable shapes headed in their direction. A silvery owl jetted over them.

"Bugger." Kaltag muttered.

Xenik strutted up to Kaltag with a wily smirk and yanked the bottle from his hand. He looked ready to start trouble. "Off with you, servant."

Kaltag returned in kind with a derisive smile. "And where's your constant shadow?" Behind the Aves deputy, Harry spotted long, golden blonde hair, attached to a leering face. "Ah, speak of the bed-warmer."

Faryn sneered, her eyes glittering in Davies' wandlight. Her predatory gaze slid over to him, her grin intensifying. "Har-ry . . . " She purred, advancing with a scheming smirk.

All of a sudden, the Gryffindor felt the familiar ropes of Influence pulling at him, winding around him, calling out to him . . . before they were abruptly snapped. "Back off, Helen of Troy. Haven't you caused enough trouble?"

The Entity sneered, winking at Harry before patting Kaltag on the nose (he swiped her arm away) and stepping back. "You're just jealous, lover."

"You wish." He spun to Icarus with a disgruntled look. "Can we get on with this?" Faryn bared her fangs in response and sauntered over to the gaggle of girls.

"Right then, the rules." He haltingly continued. "The basics: Safe areas? There are none. The forest is fair game. We all know how to play tag, right?" Several heads nodded. "You run from the It unless they tag you. If you're tagged, remember to press the pin on your front to tell everyone who's the new It. You'll find the DAFT-Com Badges at the bottom of your drinks." Harry eyed his bottle and noticed the glow did seem to be emanating from a blurry triangular shape.

"Don't forget, not only are there creatures of unmentionable danger out there . . . but Lykaeos as well." Harry thickly swallowed. He'd choose a midnight run-in with a violent hippogriff over Lykaeos any day.

"We play until," he shrugged. "Until we get caught, really. Remember: if you get caught, you stand alone. You've got no friends and this never happened. We're not covering for you. Good? Choke it down, then."

Several of the glowing glasses snapped open with a hiss following the announcement. Harry's brow furrowed as he stared at the amber liquid, wondering what this had to do with DAFT.

His decision to finally indulge came when everyone else had half-gulped their drinks down. Cracking open the top with a spell, he swilled the liquid around, then swallowed a large mouthful. From the much too sweet, lukewarm, frothy and fizzy taste, he knew it definitely wasn't butterbeer. It wasn't Ambrosian cider either, as the drink frothed in his mouth like both butterbeer and cider.

"Sweet Nectar," someone mentioned. "Diluted for our under-aged pleasure." They laughed and clunked their bottles together.

Harry knocked his with Justin's. "Here's to the Alpha-Cae, whoever that may be." Following that, many of the prefects disappeared into the forest's edge. Small flashes of light erupted as the fins were summoned.

Harry had just raised his Firebolt for final inspection when a smarmy voice carried over to him. "I see you've brought along Broomstick." The Gryffindor blinked at the dark Celestial's remark. "Never thought he'd accept, seeing as how Gryffindors bleed red and gold."



"Play nice, boys." Mandy Brocklehurst halfheartedly warned around a giggle. Harry demonstrated his annoyance by taking a deep sip from his bottle. He nearly choked when the badge landed in his mouth. He dried it off and pinned the badge with an ivory 'P' in a triad of leaves to the front of his robes.

It was then Ginny sidled alongside Harry and gave the rival Beings a pointed gaze. She raised her eyebrow in question at Harry, but all the Gryffindor could do was mouth his puzzlement. The cousins seemed to be having a rather heated conversation.

"You know," Xenik loudly continued, "He hasn't chosen yet, not officially. Your mother may be the heir; but if she abdicates, it's fair game. It could very well go to my father."

Harry watched as Kaltag polished his fin and smirked. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Androcles."

Ginny sniggered into her Nectar. "I don't think you realize what I'm offering you here, Smythe."

"Please. Do enlighten me with another of your sound whimsies."

Harry could sense the trouble they were wrapping themselves into. He really wished they could play DAFT and get it over with; better to get Hermione's wrath out of the way now than wait for her to blow up later. But, Xenik stepped face to face with the prefect.

"I am offering you a position of prestige in my court." Kaltag scoffed and rolled his eyes in Harry's direction. "A most respected status, where men fear and love you, the candy to the kingdom's sweet tooth. The most revered member." His pale hand ghosted very close to the Paraffin's cheek. "The Beloved. The Erômenos."

Harry had no idea what that word meant, but by the rock-solid rigidity in Kaltag's stance, it definitely wasn't good. In fact, many of the Celestials around them paused in the midst of conversation, their eyes wide and mouths gaping. "Get off me." Kaltag angrily hissed, knocking the offending hand away. Harry's hand lingered near his wand in case of strife.

"Bless you, cousin."

"You're going to need it more than I." Came Kaltag's quick retort. Xenik's eyes flashed with knowing before he inclined his head.

When the Celestial shuffled over to his bold housemate, Harry caught up with a splotch-faced Kaltagonus. "What was that all about?"

"Giving pointers to Broomstick, or is it Scar-face?" Xenik started up again, much to Harry's annoyance. With a smug look, he resumed, "Famous because of a stupid, unsightly mark on your head. If that's all it takes . . . I've heard all about you."

Harry made a face. "You have, have you?"

"Yes. I make it a point to know my enemies."

"And how am I your enemy?" Cleverly mocked Harry.

"Er, can we just — ?"

"You're alive. You're a Gryffindor. You disgust and mock me by your very existence." Ginny gave a start beside him but was stopped by someone else.

Harry's eyebrows lowered irritably. "I don't even know you."

"Well, I do."

"That's nice." A timid voice spoke up. "Um, back to DAFT, shall we? Time's wasting — "

Harry resisted the urge to snort. "From Slytherin? You've heard lies, then."

"Oh, I know you," the Aves seeker snarled, "And I don't like you."

The corner of his lip upturned. "Half-blood you are, yes?" Harry didn't bother to answer, instead glowering at the troublesome boy. "How a tragedy like yourself is a match for the Dark Lord, I've not a clue how thick nature could be."

"Can we please — ?"

The wind picked up a bit and Harry could feel the beginnings of restless stirrings in the plants. Ginny must've noticed as well, because she nudged him quite hard. It did the trick, and the plants settled once more.

"Pureblood father, as stupid and arrogant as Narcissus himself, sullyng himself — "

"Watch it, Xenik." Kaltag lowly growled. Harry's face hardened as the Being continued his nasty slurs.

" — With filth, when he could've done better." Harry shook with rage. "A fool, he was, dear Scar-face, to get killed for defiling himself with a dirty-blooded human — "

In the time that it took Harry to whip out his wand, strong sharp gusts blustered around the crowd. Apparently, they were sharp enough to slice through Xenik's cheek. As blood poured from his wounds, Harry heard Ginny's sudden gasp and she shoved his attention elsewhere. Harry's eyes widened.

With irises so white, the only color left in his eyes was the intense black pupils, stood the red-haired Paraffin, looming over the fallen Aves seeker. Harry had never seen him so livid. His white eyes seemed to burst with orange as he began using his force of fire. Harry didn't know what it was for until he heard the sizzling and panicked gasps from Xenik. It wasn't until the stench of burning flesh reached his nostrils that Harry realized what he was doing. He resisted the urge to gag.

Xenik did not once scream in agony, and no one moved to stop the two. With his lips pressed together in a thin line, Kaltag stood from over the boy with a fiendish grin marking his face. And when Harry had seen what the boy had done, he felt the chunks rising in his throat again.

Xenik's face was scarred — badly — from Kaltag's cruel soldering where the wind-wept scar had once bled. In his face was burned a jagged red lightning bolt, similar to his own curse scar. Sweat dampened his face from his resistance to cry out, running the blood all down his front.

"There," Kaltag triumphantly smiled, clapping his hands together. "Now you have a scar all your own."

"You're mad, Smythe!" Xenik cursed, scrambling away from the leering Paraffin.

Harry's eyes darted between the cousins dizzyingly. The young wizard uncomfortably noticed Kaltag's eyes glinted in that demented twinkle reminiscent of Bellatrix Lestrange. He sneered in a manner very unlike him.

"Just a bit." The Celestial quietly acquiesced. Everyone remained silent, staring in shock at the two. Xenik had a fearful spark in his eye Harry had never seen before. "Move along, Xenik."

"Why?" The Aves snapped. Harry noted his immediate recoil as Kaltag stormed over to him, touching nose to nose. Kaltagonus seemed to revel in the boy's fear. Harry could definitely imagine the panic the Aves seeker was feeling.

"Cause you're It." His gaze flitted between their bodies at the brilliantly glowing bottle clutched in Xenik's grasp. Where the faint glow usually flickered, pulsed a brilliant red beam, clear enough to see from the highest tower in the castle.

In the blink of an eye, the chase was on.

Several whooshes in the air and the shattering of bottles signaled the scatter of bodies. Harry turned around to see Ginny already zooming through the trees and fins clearing the branches. By the time he straddled his Firebolt and took off, he was the only one left — besides the scowling but relieved Xenik — in the meeting place.

The whistles of air singing past the Gryffindor's ears drowned the girls' cheer of excitement out. The night was colder than expected, but he didn't mind. The previous emotions of anger and bitterness were now gone, lost in the rush of air around him and long forgotten. The minute he was in the sky, Harry failed to remember the possible consequences of escaping to the forest.

It was worth it. Sweet Merlin, it was so worth it.

He zipped through the air as his toes brushed the treetops. The midnight air was clear but dark, without a cloud in the sky. Harry felt he could stay up there all day. But when a fin broke the canopy to arc back into the woods, he suddenly remembered why he was here. Tipping his broom into a harmless dive, Harry dodged the trees and fallen tree trunks to find himself in the midst of a fierce battle.

"Damn you, Smythe! I'll kill you!" Xenik was screaming, in his hand melded into a large and dangerous-looking blade, axing down trees. With the rumble the trees were making, Harry was sure someone in the castle looking out at this very moment would know something was up.

There was a whoosh of air in front of him as a cloak cleared the branches. "Broomstick!" Xenik gruffly spat. Harry gripped his broom tighter and sharply rounded a large trunk, dodging the Aves' vicious clawing. He didn't feel like explaining to Hermione or Ron why he looked like Crookshanks slept on his face. Or worse, why he was in the hospital wing with half an arm or leg.

He had rounded the trunk effectively, but in the process accidentally rammed into Xenik. Luckily, he'd missed the blade. "Argh!" The Being grunted, falling off his fin. He glared up at Harry with glimmering steel gray eyes insulting, "Stupid wizard! Always ruining things." Harry thought he would run him through with his blade when he scrambled up, but Xenik instead tapped the badge with his finger. When it glowed white he shouted, "POTTER'S IT!"

The Gryffindor blinked once, before scowling at Xenik. "What? That's not how it works."

Xenik scowled right back. "You rammed into me, you moron. Therefore, you're It." He gestured to Harry's pin, which was blinking rapidly in red. Before Harry could argue, he'd swung at him with his bladed arm. Harry jumped away, but Xenik had already mounted his fin and rocketed north. Cursing to himself, Harry held his broom handle tight and kicked off the ground into the sky.

He silently grumbled to himself, wondering how he was going to pass It on. The forest seemed quite deserted and silent, save for the few growls he'd attributed to the hungry animals. No doubt everyone heard Xenik's announcement and flew deeper into the woods. Quashing the voice inside telling him to walk back to the tower,

climb in bed and forget this night, he sped around plants and stones looking for any sign of life.

He had been quietly floating around the higher branches when he heard a loud ripping sound from the shadows beneath him. It sounded like a cloak tearing . . . which meant there was someone there! Restraining his glee, Harry quietly followed the sound of the frantic movement. This person really didn't seem to mind they were ripping their cloak to shreds or making so much noise; every tree they passed, Harry heard a tear.

As the forest thinned out, Harry could make out a head of blonde hair dodging a stickler bush. Thanking his luck, Harry took Smith's nonchalance at his cloak catching on rough bark to dive. He vaguely heard the snapping of branches and Smith barely looked over his shoulder and began to give chase.

Straightening his broom, Harry soared over the various boulders and spiny shrubs, speeding after Zacharias. In the end, his Comet series was no match for Harry's Firebolt. The Gryffindor slung-shot himself in the air and arced over the Hufflepuff, coming to a screeching halt before him. Startled, Zacharias rushed to slow his broom to avoid a collision, and barely managed. He was so engrossed into getting himself to stop that he didn't realize his badge was flashing crimson. "It." Harry triumphantly conveyed.

Zacharias looked miffed, cursing him ten ways foul. With a snicker, Harry darted away and pressed his finger to the badge just as he had seen Xenik do. It flickered on and he happily proclaimed, "Smith's it!" He heard a scramble of voices on the other side before the badge fell silent.

He dashed around the forest on his Firebolt, rarely seeing any of the other players. In fact, it was a surprise to him that he could see anyone else in this darkness. The DAFT-Com Badge sputtered every ten or so minutes, informing everyone of the new It.

So far, the only name he recognized was Selene's. Harry swore he felt heavier when she was marked, as if she was bending gravity to her will. He also spotted a bright red dot the sky, larger than a star. He distractedly pondered what the centaurs would have to say about Mars crashing down on them tonight.

The game had been going for the better part of an hour; Harry was quite surprised they hadn't been caught yet. He skirted near the thickets of the Hogsmeade part of the forest, catching a glimpse of the waning lamp near the Hogs Head pub. Harry turned to drift deeper into the brush when he heard a rustle of movement. Wand out and ready, Harry sighed in relief when he recognized the Celestial. He warily eyed him, tucking his wand away. "You're not It, are you?"

Kaltag shook his head and panted. "Davies, I think."

The two floated lazily around massive trees and low branches, catching their breaths in silence. Harry desperately had an urge to confront the Being about what he'd done to Xenik earlier, but was afraid of how he'd react.

He bristled at the thought of being defended yet again, as if he couldn't handle it. But, he grudgingly mused Xenik had it coming to him. Not quite as viciously, but he deserved something harsh for his nasty words.

"Quiet night." The Celestial interrupted his thoughts. "Usually is before testing. Nature's way of sympathy, I suppose." He heavily sighed, mussing his hair up more than usual. Harry thought he saw him discard twigs and leaves. "Next week'll be a nightmare." The Paraffin stopped his languid floating to lean back on his fin and throw his arm over his eyes.

Harry stilled his Firebolt and propped himself against a trunk for support. He had no idea where they'd stopped; only he knew he couldn't see past the thick ring of trees. They had to be pretty deep into the forest. "Want to head in? Get your last minute studying in?"

The Being snorted. "I'm saving that for breakfast. Besides, wouldn't help either way. If I don't know it by now, I never will." Harry inwardly agreed with that logic. A small animal rustled in the leaves of the large bush near them. "But at least tonight sort of got my mind off of things. Not entirely." The Being grimaced, suddenly sitting up and looking away. Harry thought he saw a fleeting look of fright in the boy's expression.

"Something wrong?" Harry ventured. By the way the Being swallowed and winced, he knew something was. But he shook his head.

"Nothing." He forced a smile. "Don't worry about it."

"You can tell me." He prodded. Kaltag's brow creased and he stared at the Gryffindor with a distant look on his face.

"Yeah," he muttered. "I can. I can always tell you." His hand reached around his neck to grope the Ravenstone Scepter, a habit that hadn't gone even after he'd found out the truth. As he lost himself to his thoughts, Harry sat up more on his broomstick.

"You can tell me anything." He repeated. "You know I won't tell anyone else." The prefect nodded, silently, running his fingers over the swirling orb. Harry could sense his unease. What was it he had to say? It couldn't be that daunting. "Whatever it is, it's probably normal."

The prefect sharply glanced up and held his gaze. "I don't think so." He lowly contradicted. "Anything but." He humorlessly laughed. "If you call what I did to Xenik normal." Harry unwillingly squirmed at the mention. Kaltag didn't notice. "I wanted to do that. Not just retaliate for his foul words, but . . . but . . ." He faltered.

Harry felt his face contort in confusion. "But what?"

The Celestial looked away and toyed with the Scepter. He bit his lip before, "I wanted to hurt him. Really hurt him."

Harry waspishly nodded. "Of course! So did I. I wanted to string the git up by his — "

A brusque sigh made its way through Kaltag's lips. "No, you don't understand. I wanted to do more than make him pay." His voice suddenly turned severe and his eyes darkened in anger. "So much more. Make him suffer, make him beg, right before I — and I don't know why."

Harry tried not to show his unease. "Maybe it's the stress. You have been studying for a full month. People snap."



"No," he shook his head. "This is more than just stress, Harry; you saw me back there! I wanted to — "

"YAAAAAHH!"

The boys were startled by a sudden figure jumping out of the bushes and launching itself at them. They separated as the shape swung at the tree with what appeared to be a knife, right where Harry had been leaning. "Come back 'ere!"

Harry's eyes widened as the figure spun around and glared at them. It was Lykaios, apparently hunting in naught but dirt and camouflage and dead leaves and . . . his underwear. His eyes glinted predatorily and he panted in conquest. "Come 'ere, beauty." He rasped sweetly. "Come 'ere so I kin gut yeh!"

He lunged again, narrowly missing the Gryffindor. Harry wound up right beside Kaltag, who was as still as a rock. "No . . . sudden . . . moves." He barely whispered from the corner of his mouth. Lykaios eyed them hungrily. "Don't move . . . until my signal. Or we'll both be strung up on his wall."

Harry gulped, hoping the crazed professor hadn't noticed. He didn't, but still held that rusty knife high, prepared to strike. The professor licked his lips at the prospect of the hunt. "Don't move. Wait. Wait." Harry didn't need to be told twice. "On three. One . . . two . . . "

A loud crackling split the air. "ABORT! ABORT!"

Lykaios pounced. "I've got yeh now, yeh chim'era!"

"SCOOT!"

Harry kicked off round a group of trees as soon as the words left the boy's lips. "Curséd hound of Hades!" He vaguely heard the demented man shout after them. They flew a safe distance from the wild man before stopping. The crackling sparked again. Harry noticed it was coming from their DAFT-Com badges, which were frantically lighting up.

"We've got company! SPLIT!" A voice crackled.

"I've got yeh now!" The Beasts professor broke through the underbrush, eyes gleaming and knife swinging.

The two sixth years briefly glanced at each other before they were flying as fast as their transports would let them.

The housemates panted and swerved as they flew for their lives. The trees thickened ahead, making it much harder to veer around, but they'd lost Lykaeos. "Harry," Kaltag panted in panic, "Now would be a really great time — " Dodge! " — For you to — " Duck! " — Move through natural objects!" They skimmed over a large boulder.

Harry swallowed, knowing exactly what he meant. It didn't escape his notice that Kaltag's eyes glowed emerald and he moved straight through the tree trunks; the only reason he hadn't fully done it was because he was with him.

He knew what the Being was asking: to at least try to use his elemental abilities to travel through the trees faster. After all, now would be the ideal time: he was too panicked to think about anything but escaping. It was the perfect mindset for the task. "Can you try?"

Harry gulped, nodding apprehensively. The Being must have sensed his disinclination, because the next thing Harry knew, Kaltag had grabbed his arm and shot them through the thicket.

It felt odd. Knowing the trees surrounded them, too thick to walk through, but they were gliding through them easily. He felt tingles racing through his body as he left one trunk and entered another and another. Kaltag's grip didn't even seem to be there as their bodies soared through the forest.

"Okay, Harry. I've got to let go. Morphing both of us is draining me." Harry did notice the tingles were getting stronger and rather uncomfortable; he didn't feel as light as before. "Try to concentrate on going through, like it's air. I'm going to let go. Okay?"

With a firm nod, the Being let go. Harry effortlessly sailed through the first tree and was immediately shocked. He had done it! He had flown through a natural object! He could travel! He could —

And then Harry rammed straight into the second tree he saw.

He jerked back, his Firebolt going one direction, his body another and he landed hard on a thick knot of root. Groaning, he blinked up at the blurred darkness several dizzy minutes later, realizing he'd lost his glasses. He heard distant rustling ahead of him and knew Kaltag had flown off without him.

The wizard clambered to his feet, careful not to trip over the roots and brushed his jeans off. His shoulder and back throbbed uncomfortably, and he knew there would be an ugly bruise come morning.

"Accio glasses," he croaked when his wand was in hand. Cold metal landed in his hand and when he pushed on his glasses, he realized one of the lenses had splintered badly. He resigned himself to fixing it when he got back to the school.

Muttering obscenities, Harry clutched his Firebolt, not feeling any damage and squinted in the darkness. He could barely see slits of the field leading up to Hogwarts near Hagrid's hut. He wasn't that far off. With a bit of maneuvering, he could make it there and sneak back into the school. Rotating his shoulder to make sure the damage wasn't too great, Harry prepared to mount his broom.

And then he saw it.

Deep, a great distance behind him in the forest, he saw it. A flash of white and an ethereal glowing. Pulling out his wand, Harry narrowed his eyes and stared farther into the forest, wondering who or what was out here. He knew it couldn't be a student or Filch, since the players had dark cloaks and Filch's lamp wouldn't have glowed that eerily.

He had decided he was seeing things and turned to climb on his Firebolt when he saw it again. This time, he knew it was a cloak, a long white one; and someone was wearing it. There was something odd about this person; it was like they were a dream, standing peculiarly in the midst of glowing smoke. It was like they weren't even there.

The figure was facing him, but Harry couldn't see their face. He brought his wand up, very cautious of the stranger. But the person didn't move. Didn't even acknowledge that he or she was watching him. They were a very good distance apart. "Who are you?" Harry

rasped, noting his voice was very quiet. The figure didn't respond or move. They just stood there with their expression cast in shadow.

The hood of the cloak billowed slightly where the face was, and then the person's head slowly rose, as if they'd finally become aware of his presence. Harry's wand was raised in a second, steadily trained on the figure. Their face was still hidden behind the long hood, but Harry could see darkness under it. "The truth lies in the dream." Its tone rumbled.

"I said who — "

"Harry!" He spun around to see the redheaded Paraffin. "What're you doing? Come on!"

The Gryffindor swung back around to face the figure, but it was gone.

"Wha — ?" He twisted around helplessly, aiming his wand in the darkness. "Did you — did you see — ?"

"Now's not the best time to black out. On your 'Bolt and let's go!"

Harry was insistent, his eyes wide and searching the thicket. "Did you — ?"

"We've got to go!" He hissed. Harry opened his mouth to ask him again when he finally heard noise upsetting the shrubbery. There was a faint yellow glow yards behind them and growing closer. By the way the beam shook, Filch was swinging his lantern with a vengeance. "You want Filch to catch us or what?"

With a defeated sigh, Harry tucked his wand away and mounted his broom, kicking off. Kaltag grabbed his arm again and they were racing through the trees, Filch's howl of frustration registering only when they got back to the castle.

Harry felt the last tingle pass through him and they were safely out in the clearing behind Hagrid's hut. There were booming barks coming from inside, but they didn't stick around to see Hagrid investigate. The meeting area was void of any sign that anyone had been there. The broken bottles, the trunk of sweet nectar — all were missing.

They flew in the safety of the shadows to the familiar area of the greenhouses, Kaltag dismounting his fin and vanishing it away. Harry hopped off his Firebolt and followed the Being into the conservatory, finally resting when the door was shut. "That was close."

Harry shook his head, leaning his broomstick on a table as he swept his fingers through his hair. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah! Filch nearly got your cloak, if — "

"No," he growled in frustration. "Did you see him? That . . . that man in the white cloak? Did you see him? Did you hear what he said?"

He was stunned when Kaltag slowly shook his head. "No. I didn't see anyone. Harry, what are you on about?"

Harry slumped against the bench in disbelief. He hadn't seen him? How could he have missed the weird smoke and glow and a white cloak in the black forest? "Are you sure?" He persisted. Kaltag again shook his head.

"You sure you didn't hit your head?"

Harry scrubbed his face with his hands, blinking through the cracks in his lenses. He knew he wasn't seeing things. He had seen a man. But Kaltag hadn't. That didn't make him crazy.

"I thought . . . I thought I saw . . . " He glanced in Kaltag's direction only to see the look of befuddled agitation on the Being's face. The wizard issued a weighty sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Never mind. Let's get back to the tower before we're both expelled."

With a hesitant nod, Harry allowed the Being to lead them back to the dark castle.

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(Author Fodder: I dunno if anyone has come up with DAFT before (Dark Forest Tag), it just came to me mid-2005 during psychology...)

A/N: Read and review please! The Extended Version is available on Yahoo; it's 38 pages long and 2300 words longer than the Abridged edition (chopped out six pages of scenes). Doesn't that make you curious as to what you're missing...? ;)

A/N 2: If you didn't know, there is a deleted scene on the website as well as replies to your reviews (from last chapter and I'll answer all of them as you respond). Also, watch the website closely over the next few months. Yes, months. The last four chapters are...wild, to say the least. It might take a bit longer for the next chapter because I'm planning on releasing them one after the other. I want you to get it not exactly all at once, but so you won't have to wait a month for the next like usual. Just my way of saying, 'thanks for sticking it out so long'. But I'll save the sentiments for later. The end is upon us, folks! See you in 28.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight: Ensediis (or Things That Seem)

"Who are you?" Harry rasped, noting his voice was very quiet. The figure didn't respond or move. They just stood there with their expression cast in shadow.

The hood of the cloak billowed slightly where the face was, and then the person's head slowly rose, as if they'd finally become aware of his presence. Harry's wand was raised in a second, steadily trained on the figure. "The truth lies in the dream." Its tone rumbled.

"I said who — "

Suddenly, the stranger raised their head and Harry paled at its scabbed face, complete with shiny ooze, caved in cheeks and red eyes. It bared its sharp yellow teeth, snarling and raised a clawed hand.

"The truth lies in the dream!" The forest was swallowed in darkness.

He wasn't in the forest any longer, but behind bars. Where was he? Azkaban? He didn't think the jail would look this comfortable, with dim lighting and a plush cushion beneath his back. No, this was way too cozy to be a prison. What was Voldemort playing at?

Harry tried to move, but found himself restricted. His arms and legs flailed, but other than that, he had no control over them; he could barely turn his head! Where was he, and where was Voldemort? What did he want with him now?

Seeing no plotting Dark Lords or minions in sight, Harry decided to investigate his situation. From what little movement his head made, he found he was surrounded on all sides in this...comfortable prison, but he could clearly see the ceiling. It was pretty far up; fifteen feet, was his guess. So Voldemort didn't want him going anywhere, but why leave the cage open?

He tried moving his arms to find his wand, but it was no use. Shouting was also useless; the only noises he made were fussy groans. He'd just about had it being trapped in one of Voldemort's schemes when he heard voices.

"...You had no right!" A feminine voice growled.

"I know you're upset right now — " A male voice. Were they married? Harry was intrigued. He tried to move, but still no such luck.

"Upset? Upset? Upset was my learning the truth weeks ago." In his line of sight, Harry could see her vibrant red hair shaking along with her head. "Upset is what I feel knowing my own husband doesn't believe me!" Well, that meant they weren't married. "No, I am beyond upset. I want to kill you right now for taking what's mine!" Her delicate hand came to rest on the edge of the prison bars, but he couldn't glimpse her face.

He nearly choked in shock when the male stranger spoke again. "Now, Lily, please don't — "

"Do anything rash? Hasty?" Harry exclaimed, 'Lily?' but it came out as more of a gurgle. His mother Lily? His father's wife — that Lily? He could hardly remember their times together, but he doubted he ever heard her so angry.

Anyway, what was she doing talking to this man, without his father in sight? "You'd want that, wouldn't you? Because it'd only solidify what you've all been saying for months now: That I'm crazy."

"We've not — "

"I'm not crazy and we both know it!" Her hand gripped the edge of the pen tightly, her knuckles pasty white. Again, Harry moved, but he only succeeded in hitting his fist on the bars. Why did Voldemort want him to see this?

At his anxious thrashing, his mother finally turned to face him. He tried talking to her, but no sound came out. She only smiled brightly at him, her identical green eyes aglitter in excitement, before the man said something again and her smile quickly faded. "What you did was...unforgivable." She turned away, ignoring Harry's protests. "And when we get out of here, I'll see to it that you rot in Azkaban, you thief!"

There was an indistinct noise before the male spoke again. Harry was really curious as to what they were arguing about, but it was so roundabout, he didn't know where to begin. Or why he was locked in a prison and his mother wouldn't release him. "That won't happen.



No justice system would believe your words. You said it yourself: everyone thinks you're crazy. You're not going anywhere."

Her hand tightened on the edge of the rail. When she spoke, it was with a calm finality. "We're leaving tonight. Either you let us by or I will kill you." Harry struggled to sit up.

A derisive chuckle. "You wouldn't do it."

"Watch me."

"You are not leaving."

"I'd like to see you try and stop us." His mother paused, clenching her visible hand into a fist. "I can't believe you'd do this. I thought...I trusted you."

"That was your first mistake. I am a guardian. I trust no one, and I do what is required of me. Even if it meant gaining your trust simply for the will of fortune to succeed; even if that mean hurting you in the worst way imaginable." Lily's fingers dug into the rail as all this was spoken.

Harry frantically wondered what got his mother so upset she would risk killing someone; and who was this bastard that hurt her? "You are not going anywhere. Don't make me take drastic measures, Lily. I don't want to do this, so don't force me. Step away."

"What will you do if I don't? Kill me?" She mocked.

"I don't want to."

"You already have!" She shouted, starting up another screeching noise from both sides of the dark room. "We're going." Harry fidgeted, failing to stir like his previous attempts. Where was he and why the hell couldn't he move? There was more arguing before he gave up his struggling to listen in.

"...Belongs."

"No, you're not."

There was a heavy silence before Lily's furious tone broke the quiet. "You...can't...stop me." The man didn't reply for a few moments, as if he were thinking. And then, Harry heard his final response.

"Obliviate!"

And his world went black.

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He tried to thrash and kick, but it was no use. He was still restrained. With a sharp breath Harry blinked his eyes open, staring up at the canopy of his four-poster instead of a high ceiling. His bedding and pajamas were soaked through with sweat.

The Gryffindor tried to move his hand to wipe it away, but realized what had limited his movement. He found himself tangled in his sheets, arms and legs bound in red. Controlling his sharp breaths, Harry set about the difficult task of untangling himself.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were taking the P.E.G.s today, Harry." Seamus smirked from across the room.

Harry broke his arm free, only to wince at the stiffness in his shoulder. He was sure there was a bruise there after colliding with that tree last night. Perching his glasses on his nose, he unwrapped himself from the bedclothes and got ready for lessons, pushing the dream to the back of his mind.

The arrival of morning had everyone dragging their feet. Those who avoided the Great Hall stayed in their common rooms or ran to the library for a last minute cram. But for the brave souls who entered the Great Hall...

The Celestials were in chaos. Today was the first day of P.E.G.A.S.U.S and O.L.Y.M.P.U.S. testing for the sixth and seventh years respectively. Naturally, both years were already panicking into their beans and toast.

Isis was in tears by her fourth sip of juice; Basil began to hyperventilate when anyone said anything beginning with the letter 'P'. Yorick and Thanos looked decidedly green while Endymion was

whiter than the silver bloodstains on the Bloody Baron's clothing. Nikola bent spoons for the first ten minutes of breakfast while Starbuck downed a glass of juice and resumed rubbing his forehead.

When Harry took inventory of the Paraffins, one missing person in particular stood out. He hadn't heard him come up to the dormitory after the game (they'd parted ways in the common room) and he wasn't in bed when Harry woke up. Neither, for that matter, was Icarus. He'd already noted that most of the DAFT-goers were at breakfast this morning, so as not to arouse suspicion.

"Anyone seen Tag?" Selene plopped between him and Ron, playfully shoving the griping redhead aside. "He promised to help me theorize rope defense this morning. I swear that boy can be so daft sometimes." She smirked when Harry coughed up his pumpkin juice.

"You just want to see me tied up, is all."

"Ah, here comes trouble."

The Paraffin prefects sank into their seats like rocks, tiredly piling their plates. "Where on Earth did you get that scratch?" Hermione exclaimed at Icarus. Harry noted his face did have a fair few cuts, a nasty one just across his chin.

He shrugged. "Fought a Voltaire for the last book in the library. Vicious creatures." Hermione didn't look like she believed him one bit. Harry was glad he'd spelled the few small scratches he had away this morning while the Gryffindors were down in the common room.

He really didn't want to explain why it looked like he'd run into a few doors and stone walls to everyone else. Luckily his face wasn't in need of much work, but the scratches would gain unwanted attention, especially since Ron and Hermione saw him go straight to sleep last night with a clean face. And he certainly couldn't use the excuse that he was pranked with an ear-biting pillow or that he'd cut himself while shaving . . . .

Hermione turned back to the Daily Prophet, the headline earning a snicker from Harry. "There are notices about the play in here. And...hmm. The Prophet reports that Mars was unusually close to

Earth last night, practically visible with the naked eye." Hermione summarized.

"What's Firenze got to say about that?" Ron chuckled.

"Baffled the Muggles; it popped out of nowhere. Strange." Selene smirked behind her (or rather, Yorick's) glass of milk.

Another few minutes passed as owls poured in and books replaced plates of food and off the cuff quizzing sessions began. Some students looked greener and greener with every question.

Only when a commotion stirred about the Hall did the testing students turn their attentions elsewhere. "Medusa blind me! What happened to Xenik?" Exclaimed Nikola. Harry spotted the blackened scar on his face with a grimace, glancing at the 'artist' himself.

Kaltag cast him a fleeting look and sipped his beverage. "I dunno. Nasty run in with his razor?" Xenik didn't spare a glance in their direction, sitting at his table with his back to the rest of the Hall.

Harry felt Yorick squirm beside him. "Ten minutes to testing. I'm this close to papping in me pants..." Harry moved away quickly as if his robes suddenly ignited.

The redheaded Paraffin pushed his breakfast away. "You never cease to disgust me, Kaenslar. Um, Thanos?" The olive-faced Sliat raised his head from his arms. "You look every bit like your father...except I don't remember him looking that green while facing the Twelve Labors. But like father, like son, right? Can't wait to see you annihilate that Nemean Lion...or maybe the Stymphalian Birds? No, it's gotta be the Lernaean Hydra..."

Thanos tried to scowl but moaned, stumbling away from his cackling housemates, most likely to find a suitable retching ground. Nikola threw her brother a dark look and sped after him, upsetting the loose papers on the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables.

Soon after, the Hall began emptying, the Celestials rushing to put up their books and notes and the Hogwarts students wishing them luck and heading to class. "I don't need luck," the smug redhead bragged. "I've got wit."

"Yeah," Ron muttered in Harry's ear. "Dimwit." He stifled a groan when Ron hit his bad shoulder and chuckled. "You all right?" Harry inwardly cursed himself when Ron noticed his wince.

"Fine," he waved off. "Slept wrong is all. Did you get what McGonagall was saying about Facial Transfigurations?" And the conversation thankfully went from there. He really had no intention of dropping the DAFT bomb on Ron and Hermione now. Perhaps, sometime in the near future: ten years down the line certainly sounded like a start.

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Harry added another hash mark to the margin of his notes. So far, Professor Flitwick said the word 'culmination' sixty-three times in the last hour. That had to be some sort of record. He added another tally as the word was repeated.

Whatever he was talking about had to be important. Maybe, Culmination Charms? He wasn't paying attention. Taking a brief glance around the room, he realized the only one paying attention was — surprise, surprise — Hermione. He supposed it was because of the excitement of today, really of the past week, that everyone's mind seemed to be occupied.

Official testing was ending today for all years and schools. No one was spared — the non-O.W.L and N.E.W.T. students were being prepped for final exams this week. Harry of course, wasn't at all thrilled to the year ending. It meant he'd be going back to the Dursleys next Monday. Ron had, as always, offered him a stay at the Burrow. "Mum and dad aren't likely to refuse," he'd joked.

But for now, Harry sought to enjoy his last days at Hogwarts, for it was certainly a memorable year. He was already nostalgic about the pressure and tension that came with the normal end of year testing. Harry was only thankful for the warm normalcy the school presented — or as normal as Hogwarts could be.

Perhaps the most curious thing to happen was the number of tents that had suddenly sprang out of nowhere right after their midnight high jinks. He hadn't seen the Quidditch pitch all week, as rows of

tents enshrouded it for Celestial testing. No one was allowed in but the students. Professor Dumbledore himself, to bar entry from any snooping, warded the tents. He had even declared the field a no-fly zone.

No one but the tested students knew what happened behind the sheets, but Harry had definitely seen a large number return worse for the wear. He'd accidentally overheard Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall talking about the number of students and proctors visiting the infirmary for bruises and broken bones.

The only glimpse he'd caught of the overseers were the healthy ones walking in and out of the castle with their long robes and decorations, showing off their extensive knowledge ("and Society of the Snootiest membership, thankyouverymuch," mocked Nikola).

Even parts of the Dark Forest were roped off for Questing, the Celestial Beasts practical. Again, he hadn't seen much, but Starbuck explained their task was to find and handle certain creatures released into the wild. There was a wild rumor spreading about that Lykaios had snuck in a Manticore for the seventh years to find, engage, capture and skin. As it was, no one had seen or heard from him since the night of DAFT, so Harry hoped he hadn't gone and done something that stupid.

And the students, Harry choked on a snort. Hermione gave him a sharp look from across the room and returned to Flitwick's lesson. The effects of stress on the fifth, sixth, and seventh years were not at all pleasant. On his way to defense the other day, he'd seen a student carried out on a stretcher from the Great Hall.

He had also heard of several seventh years banned from the library indefinitely for throwing a fit. Bouts of mild illness such as dehydration and sleep deprivation (and Roger Davies suspiciously sprouting tentacles from his neck) had the Infirmary at its busiest. Even Cho, he noticed, looked like she didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the sudden strain. Needless to say, Harry then realized the Nastily Exhausting Wizard Tests were exactly that: nastily exhausting.

The Celestials weren't spared, either. The olive tinge remained on several students' skins for the length of exams. Arguments and

spats had erupted out of nothing at times and other times, the Paraffins brought their disagreements back to the common room. Straight from testing the second day, the Smythe brothers had a fantastic shouting match, leaving their sister stuck in the middle.

Both looked like they had wanted to curse the other severely, their eyes burning bright with annoyance from what, no one had a clue. But everyone knew if they had unleashed their forces in such fury, their power would have more than likely destroyed the tower, if not the entire floor.

Which was another thing Harry was grateful for. The fact that the 'Evolution Evaluation' was held outdoors. From what Hermione had researched ("No surprise there," Kaltag had cynically stated at the news), it was an assessment at how well the physical Beings and Entities could control their forces. Rumor had it there was a confounded Muggle kept on the grounds so the students (and test supervisors) could torture them with their forces and Obliviate them afterward.

Of course, several students were convinced this was true, especially with all the secrecy about testing procedures. Harry was quite sure Dumbledore would have never allowed that to happen, but he could never be sure. His thoughts idly drifted back to the dream he'd had of Voldemort's latest plans, which unpleasantly reminded him of the dream he'd experienced last week.

No, it wasn't that he'd forgotten about that — it was highly improbable that he would simply forget someone threatening to kill his mother. What plagued him was the reason he was dreaming this and if — he sincerely hoped — it was really a dream. Otherwise, whoever had intimidated his mother with death was still out there. But...what were they arguing about?

The conversation was all over the place, and Harry didn't know if they were referring to a person or an object. Perhaps his mother knew about the weapons? And whom exactly was she talking to if it wasn't his father or Sirius or Remus? He made a mental note to ask them the next time they met.

A sharp jab in his side jarred him back to the present. Ron gave a discreet nod at his notes. "He said it again." He muttered out the side of his mouth. Harry frowned, crossing the four slashes to make

it five. Flitwick was saying something about end of the year exams when the bell rang and the bored students gratefully staggered out of class.

"Whew!" Ron sighed as they tramped out. "One class left. I don't think I can take much more today. I think we should just skive." Harry vaguely nodded in agreement. The day had been a tiring one: first Snape had been in such a foul mood; they practically flew out the room when class was over.

And in Defense, Kenward seemed off, withdrawn; as if someone had told him today was his last. Harry noticed that Amenophus had a very strong, wild glow today; almost violent and more brilliant than Harry had ever seen before. When he'd stayed after to question Kenward about it, the man curtly sent him away with a solemnly expectant face. Had he known something? Was Amenophus giving off a warning of some sort about Voldemort?

"Don't even think about it. Hagrid said today's lesson was special. He'd be devastated if we didn't show up and really, we haven't seen him for a while." Hermione logically stated.

"I am a bit curious, though." Ron muttered, rubbing his chin. "I just hope it isn't something that can hunt us down and eat us."

"No, that was the last class." Harry reminded.

They pushed through the crowds. "And the class before that."

"And the class before that..." Harry grimaced. "If he's got something special today, I'm not sure I want to know what it is." Even Hermione didn't object.

Ron readily agreed. "The last good surprise we had was the hippogriffs. Mind, Buckbeak did almost tear Malfoy's arm off...not that I'm complaining. But Hagrid's got to...see that...wha...?" Harry gave the prefect a strange look and followed his stunned gaze. He nudged him in the side, leaning close to the dark-haired wizard. "Oi, Harry," he whispered loudly, pointing to the line of lingering boys. "They're wearing skirts."

"Weasley," a familiar voice drawled, "You've got about as much tact as a Gorgon in a beauty pageant."



"It's not nice to make fun of Harry like that." Icarus snickered. Harry was stopped from gesturing rudely by Hermione's glare.

From what he could see, Ron was partially right. The Beings lining the entrance hall were either in tunics or leather...skirts...in their house colors. Either way, they were in skirts.

Some were stretching or lightly sparring with towels about their necks and, Harry just noticed, Mender Magus was moving down the line to give them short physicals. He noted she looked at Xenik with an expression akin to pity, even though the nasty scar on his face had faded quite a bit.

"Are you waiting for the Defense Practical?" Hermione inquired. When they nodded she beamed. "I've read about that. It's dangerous, isn't it?"

Thanos shook his head. Harry noticed he looked much better today, though the green shade sort of lingered in his complexion. "Not if you know what you're doing."

Ron pointed out the obvious. "Where are the girls? They're not fighting, are they?" Hermione looked as if she wanted to lecture him on his patronizing tone, but thought better of it.

"They did earlier, when the Huntress was here."

"I'm dying for a lie-in." Yorick whined after Magus cleared him. "Jus' this morning, I — "

"Yorick, please keep your mouth shut. I already lost my lunch today because of you." Kaltag stood from adjusting his boots. Several students laughed as the Gryffindors wished them luck and moved to allow Mender Magus to finish examining the boys. Harry spun around to step outside when he found himself smacking into a solid wall, dropping his books.

"Damn! I'm sorry, I — " Harry blinked at the familiar face. "Daedelus?"

The second-in-command smirked and handed Harry his books. "I'm flattered you remember me, Mr. Potter. Hello Miss Granger, Mr.

Weasley." He greeted the flushed witch and wizard. Harry muttered his thanks for the books and stepped back to let Daedelus pass. Upon further inspection, he noticed he was dressed similarly to the boys; only his was more formal military attire.

"You're not proctoring, are you?" Kaltag brusquely stated by way of greeting.

The Vice Admiral frowned. "I'll pretend that was enthusiasm I sensed."

The younger Being rolled his eyes. "Great."

"Good morning, young soldiers!" a voice boomed from the end of the line. Harry recognized the angular face of Headmaster Chiron marching between the dual lines of students. "Ready for Defense? To the pitch with you!"

"Hey — Headmaster Chiron! Headmaster, I call foul! Smythe knows the proctor!" Xenik snitched, earning a dangerous look from said Being.

Harry raised a brow when the elder Celestial gently smiled. "Androcles, you all know the Vice Admiral; he supervised your Defense theory last year." Xenik's face fell. "Is your memory suitably jogged?"

Harry heard Ron quietly snicker and Hermione's punch land. "But...that's not fair!" the dark Being griped.

"Mr. Xenik, are you presuming that the administrator will not use the strictest professionalism and impartiality when assessing everyone's skills as is required by oath and law?" Harry knew the question was a rhetorical one; he vaguely wondered if Chiron enjoyed watching his students squirm.

Xenik turned sufficiently white at this. "No, sir."

Chiron's face held a small grin. "Now, do we still have a problem?" The other Beings snorted behind their towels. Of course, Kaltag looked smugger than Malfoy on his best day. Xenik simply stared at his feet and shook his head. The headmaster smiled and squeezed his shoulder. "Good. Foul overridden. Let's continue to the pitch,

please, and no sparring on the way or when you get there or I will have Vice Admiral Diomedes deduct points!"

As the Beings slapped on their wrist cuffs and followed Daedelus, Hermione gasped. "Let's go! We're late!" She dragged Ron and Harry down the stairs by the sleeves of their robes.

"Hey, Potter! Don't forget your tutoring this afternoon!" Kaltag called out. Harry nodded and tried not to stumble over his feet.

"Tutoring?" he vaguely heard someone — probably Icarus — question.

"Didn't you hear? The Goody Golden Gryffindor is failing Herbology. No doubt it'll be all over the school in a matter of hours..." Harry scowled over his shoulder at the ginger-haired prefect's smirk.

They made it to Hagrid's in record time, hunched over and panting. The last person to arrive was Neville, and he looked rather put out. "Why didn't you tell me?" He asked Harry reprovingly.

"W-what?" The wild-haired wizard tried to catch his breath.

"Herbology. I could've helped you."

Harry's eyes widened fractionally at the round-faced boy's sad look. "Oh, um...sorry, Neville. It was sort of...spontaneous." It wasn't like he asked to be able to control nature. "I really wasn't expecting it."

"I'll say." Mumbled Ron. Hermione weakly slapped his arm again.

"I'll come to you next time. Honest." Neville measured the spectacled Gryffindor with a look and nodded in acceptance.

The hut door banged open and the massive form of Hagrid strode out, sans Lykaos. Harry noticed his black eyes twinkled with every step and he wasn't sure, but it seemed under the tangled mass of beard, Hagrid was beaming. In his hands he had a tub of fruits and vegetables, which he dropped near his usual barrel of water.

"Gather 'round, you lot. I've got a real treat fer yeh today!" He slapped his frying pan-sized palms together and rubbed them in

excitement. Ron gulped, and Harry glanced at the rest of the class, shaking in unmistakable fear.

"I don't feel well already." Muttered Ron.

"Got a special guest, as well. Be kind an' please welcome our guest as 'e tells yeh all abou' our lesson today."

A dark shadow emerged from the doorway of Hagrid's hut, throwing his cloak off and, Harry guessed, over Hagrid's coat rack. Well, Harry thought, today's just full of surprises, as he spotted the Muggle business suit.

"Good morning. I am Spiridon Smythe and, normally, I don't do this," he tossed a smile in Harry, Ron and Hermione's direction as he backed toward the forest line. "But since I inadvertently have the only breed of this on Olympus, I had to drop in and boast."

The students laughed, at ease now knowing they were in the care of a rational adult. Harry was curious to know what Spiridon owned that had him travel all the way from Greece; he hadn't seen any special animals at the manor. "Professor Hagrid, if you would do the honors?"

Hagrid's barely visible cheeks burned red. Apparently, he was still bashful about his title. The half-giant brought his hand to his mouth and let out a whistle loud enough to disturb the birds in the highest treetops. For a while, everything was quiet as nothing happened.

Harry wondered if the creature they were studying today was silent and invisible as nothing happened. He exchanged questioning looks with both Hermione and Ron before he faintly heard it.

A rustling. It was quiet, high; overhead, probably. A soft snort. Faint 'whooshing' and beating sounds, and more rustling. Honing his concentration on the environment, Harry ignored the murmuring class and focused on what the creature could tell him.

He barely sensed anything but a great feeling of elation, power and...arrogance? And...what's this? Something gentler, but firm when needed; wryness, amusement and...Fondness? Another feeling?

"What's that, Harry?" Hermione quietly asked. At his quizzical look she replied, "You were completely gone and then said 'two'. Two what?"

Harry shook his head, looking away from their intent looks. "There are two. Two...different sets of feelings." He whispered and looked toward the instructors, finding Spiridon's gaze on him.

"Are you all right, Mr. Potter?" he softly inquired. At Harry's nod, his eyes remained on his, but turned to the forest canopy. A few gasps were heard as Harry collected himself and turned to the sky.

Two large blurs were skimming over the treetops — he inwardly chuckled at the irony that he'd done the very same days ago — before Harry could make out what they were. Unlike hippogriffs, these were all horse...with wings. When they landed he couldn't help but admire the winged horses.

The larger of the two was jet black with a few white hairs rounding the coronet band above its rear hooves; its wings looked black and leathery from the distance, covered in sleek feathers of midnight. There was a gleam in its eye that made it seem very wily; Harry could only presume this horse was quite a handful.

The unnaturally dark, smoky gray smaller of the two looked completely the same except for color and the pointy ivory horn sprouting from its forehead.

Spiridon smiled and pat the horses on their necks, facing the class. "As you can see, these are winged horses. The black one is Ensediis, my son's; and this beautiful mare is Teru, his mate. Can anyone tell me what breed of horse Teru is?"

Hermione's hand shot up as she danced on the balls of her feet. The boys looked at each other in amusement. "She's an Ethiopian Pegasos," she answered excitedly. "Very rare nowadays because of the 1920's mass poaching for their horns."

"Pegasos Aithiopikos, yes," the triplets' father affirmed, affectionately stroking the horses' manes. They whickered in content. "Only fifteen are left in the world, under the various protections of our respective governments."

"It is quite hard to get them to breed with one another, since most were killed before their habits could be studied. But Teru is the last of the recently born purebred Aithiopes at three years old. It was our hope that she would find a mate in her own kind, but she seems to have fallen for this menace instead."

The students laughed as Ensediuss snorted in contempt and batted Spiridon's hand away. "I was joking, pest." It took Hagrid's bribery of an apple to get Ensediuss to return to Spiridon's petting. "And Ensediuss is a handsome, four-year-old fiend, yes?"

He grunted and chopped at the soil as if to say, 'Ego sufficiently stroked. Carry on'. "He is a standard winged equine, the firstborn of Pegasos and Polaris. He stays with Teru in the palace stables where they are cared for quite sufficiently."

"Don't be shy." Hagrid finally spoke. "Yeh can come up an' pet 'em one at a time, if yeh please. An' be mindful o' that horn."

Practically every student lined up to participate. "Yes; any suspicious moves and she'll agitate herself and Ensediuss. And also watch their wings; one flap and we'll likely find you laying across the clearing. Any questions?" He nodded at Seamus.

"Did you name him?"

Spiridon shook his head with a sad smile. "My son named him. You're — " he glanced at the front of Seamus' robes, " — a Gryffindor, yes? Then you must know Kaltagonus."

"Who doesn't?" Ron grumbled.

"Ensediuss' back legs from the knee down were white and gray when he was first born. Kaltag predicted they'd turn black as he got older, that his dark color would pervade the rest of his quarters, menacing the white hairs until they were overtaken. That, and he was quite the menace. Hence, Ensediuss."

The creature whinnied and backed away from Spiridon with an expression similar to a glare. Harry could feel the annoyance rolling off of him in waves and couldn't help but chuckle.

After the students took turns patting and studying the horses (the boys rolled their eyes at the girls gushing over their soft fur), Hagrid lectured on a few points they needed to know. Finally, Spiridon clapped his hands together and smirked at the group. "Now: anyone brave enough for a test fly?"

The class ended on that high note, with most of the class taking turns flying once over the forest and back again. Harry noted the ride wasn't as awkward as his flight with Buckbeak as the horses were surprisingly smooth fliers, but he still preferred his broom.

As they climbed toward the castle lightheartedly talking about the class, Spiridon's familiar figure caught up with them. "Hermione, Ron, Harry. Good to see you again. I trust you are all doing well?" The trio nodded and muttered confirmations. "And you are studying for your testing, yes?" He gave them sharp looks, eased only by his amusement. "Excellent, excellent. I just wanted to ask you if it wouldn't be much trouble — "

"Oh, none at all, Mr. Smythe. We'll do anything." Ron earnestly declared.

"Tell my children I will see them at the drama," he informed, draping his cloak over his arm. "And if you see Kaltagonus, please send him to me; I need to see him. Let him know I will be either in Professor Dumbledore's office or Professor Snape's classroom. Also, tell him I've brought along Ensedijs. He's due for a proper ride."

Ron goofily laughed, running a hand through his hair. "Don't mention it, Mr. Smythe." Harry gave him a strange look, which was promptly ignored. When the triplets' father opened his mouth to speak again, he was interrupted by a soft hoot and a silvery-white blur swooped low to settle on his shoulder.

"Argentum, not now." He sternly acknowledged, patting the owl's feathers. The avian creature gave him a solemn hoot and settled on his shoulder, regarding the trio of Gryffindors with a serious look. "Well, then. Tell him I've got his unrelenting feathered beast holding me hostage."

The general grinned at the three of them and took to the stairs, holding the persistent owl in place. "You know, you three are welcome to come over any time this summer. I am sure the children

would love to have you. I admit, it was nice to have such a lively manor once more." He chuckled. "Almost as if I had more children for a few weeks." With that, he wistfully smiled in departure and disappeared into the school.

"How a prat like Kaltagonus could've come from such a nice bloke as Mr. Smythe..." Ron shook his head with a scowl. "Mind boggling."

Harry chuckled. "It was nice of him to invite us over."

Hermione nodded. "It's obvious he misses his wife, and his kids."

"Okay. How'd you come up with that conclusion? Never mind, I don't want to know." Ron had that silly smile on his face again. "He wants more kids? He could adopt me." Harry and Hermione both snorted. "I don't mind, really. My brothers would be glad to be rid of me."

"Oh, Ron. Don't say that!"

Harry smirked. "You do realize if Mr. Smythe adopts you, you'd be related to...him." He teased. Ron's fanciful expression sobered and immediately soured.

"Oh, right. Bugger that, then. Come on, dinner's early tonight, remember? I want to enjoy it before Yorick gets the urge to tell one of his stories."

The walk to the Great Hall was uneventful, save for the very crowded and noisy atmosphere. It seemed parts of the Gryffindor/Paraffin table were celebrating the end of testing rather boisterously, as McGonagall and Thetis had briskly walked away with identical scowls. Hermione squeezed between Nikola and Endymion to prattle over the exams.

"We miss anything?" Harry asked as they settled down. He gaped as the food seemed to reach Ron's mouth before he even sat down.

"Mm," Kaltag hummed as he swallowed, awkwardly eating with his left hand. "Only the constant threats of detention, the Hufflepuffs throwing confetti and paper flowers, and your seventh years ripping off their clothes, burning their books, and hexing Snape to tap dance to Broadway musicals. In other words: nothing."



"How'd you do?" Asked Ella, seated comfortably beside the prefect. Harry noted her also clumsily reaching over her plate with a single hand.

"I'll know in a few weeks' time."

"How do you think you did?"

The Being smiled in a way that could only be described as supercilious. "Spectacular." Ron grunted and scowled into his meal.

Nodding, Harry sipped his pumpkin juice. "Oh, your father wants to see you. He's here, you know. With your horse."

The redhead snorted, fussing with his spoon. "Of course. Ensedius is bait. He knows I'd never willingly meet with him otherwise." Harry frowned, but didn't answer. The Being nudged the enigmatic witch and motioned to the pudding. "Share?"

"Yeah. My spoon." And when she brought her hand up to the table, Harry noticed why they were eating so suspiciously. Their hands were firmly clasped together and it didn't look like either of the two was keen on letting go. Murmurs instantly broke out around their area and Harry rolled his eyes as a few necks craned to eavesdrop on the two. They didn't seem to notice.

A loud clatter crashed from near Hermione. Harry heard Endymion mutter a quick apology before she rushed from the table. More excited whispers broke out, but the redheaded duo were either oblivious or ignored it well, focusing on idle conversation and their shared dessert. Ron looked like the only one who didn't seem too thrilled about this new development. Frankly, as long as they weren't snogging at the table, Harry was fine with it.

The constant undertones and curious eyes staring in their direction was starting to grate on Harry's nerves when the Being stood. "I'll meet you at the greenhouses in thirty. I've got to clean up and get out of this...thing," he hissed in disgust at his soiled clothing. With a furtive smile at Ella, he was out the Hall. And still the whispers raged.

"See you later, then." He spoke to the strangely silent Ron. "I'll go on ahead." He sent a quick look in Hermione's direction and stood from his chair.

"If you're still confused, don't hesitate," Ella's pleasant voice stopped his tracks. "I'm not that great, but I would make sure you don't fail." Smiling tightly, Harry nodded and went on his way. He was definitely going to hurt Kaltag tonight. Or at least bruise him up a bit.

By the time he had reached the greenhouses, he could see the carriages in the distance, bringing parents and friends and observers from Hogsmeade. He hadn't heard that much about tonight's play, and would have, like most of the other boys, ditched it. But Hermione's persistence (and threats) won out, and he and Ron were going to be dragged to it to, in Hermione's words, 'experience culture'.

"That's just a nice way of saying you're a couple of brutes who could do with a bit of sophistication." Circe bluntly put it. Hermione didn't argue. The news coming from Circe — even if they had overcome her influential presence, the boys didn't raise a fuss about it.

Harry focused on maturing some of the more lifeless plants until his tutor arrived. When he did, Harry first realized he wasn't wearing the kind of clothes one would consciously frolic in dirt with. "Oh, right. I told you your dad's — ?"

"Ya told me, don't need a repeat, thank you very much."

"Did you speak to him?"

Kaltag threw him a skeptical look. "If I did, half of Hogwarts would be in ruins by now."

They both rolled up their sleeves. "You meeting him, then?"

"Now, why would you ask me a stupid question like that?"

Harry became instantly annoyed. "It's not stupid, I just assumed — "

"Assumptions are stupid." The boy proclaimed. "Understanding is the cure to ignorance, but first you must have the nerve to inquire."

Harry froze, blinking. "...What?"

Kaltag ran a hand through his unusually neat hair. "Sorry. I took my Philosophy exam this morning, so that garbage is still running through me. Anyway, let's get to work, shall we? I need to kill a few things before the big 'face off'. By the way, this session ends when Argentum arrives. We recap, practice, duel, whatever. Let's not make this messy; I've got big plans tonight."

Harry wordlessly summoned a vine to slither around his wrist. "You're meeting him after this?"

The Celestial crossly shook his head. "Mm-mm. Rule number one, Harry: Never ever go sober to a talk with Spiridon Smythe. You'll want to be adequately shitefaced to lessen the pain of him laying it in to you. That, and it makes the situation so much more amusing."

The wizard frowned. "That's not funny."

"Well, you're the ultimate sanctified Gryffindor who's a virgin to the hangover. After a few shots, you'll change your mind. But since you're so desperate for details, Parvati," he purposely smirked, getting the desired rise out of Harry, "I'm going to Hogsmeade."

Harry's eyes widened. He wasn't expecting that. "Hogsmeade? What for? I thought you dressed up for your father."

Kaltag scoffed, beckoning the twine to him. "No, I'm dressing to impress. Got a date with Ella tonight." He had that silly, twisted grin on his face that made Harry want to gag.

"And the play?"

"What about it?" Harry deflected the ill-intentioned vine. "Read the book, seen the play, big yawn. Besides, sneaking into Hogsmeade and pretending to be stowaways from Beauxbatons has more appeal."

The Gryffindor shook his head. He really hoped he wasn't this stupid when it came time to fall in love (God forbid). "I didn't think you'd be daft enough to try anything under your father's nose."

"Well, a, he'll be busy enough with the play and b, I've been testing over a week and what little brain cells that have gone unaffected are

commanding me to rebel, rebel, rebel." He flung an orb of energy at the wizard. "My body knows best; who am I to argue?"

"Ha, ha." Harry's sarcasm was apparent as he countered the attack with his wand. "You need to stop hiding and get it over with." He dodged another orb. From the slight shudder in the plants, he could tell it had more energy behind it than usual.

"What makes you think I'm hiding?" The blue-eyed Being challenged, his tone aggressive.

"Let's see," Harry cynically began. "You're in a greenhouse for one; and you're skiving the play to go on a date, when you could do that tomorrow or some other time. That would qualify as hiding."

"You wanted this session." He insisted.

"You're hiding."

"I'M NOT..." the Being's voice was raised and the vegetation rustled with agitation. He calmed and deflated. "...hiding. I'm...regrouping." He darkly muttered. Harry's brow merely rose. Kaltag sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Don't say it, Potter. Don't."

Harry shrugged, pretending to send a ball of energy but flinging out a hex instead. Kaltag disappeared into the ground and reappeared behind the table, his emerald eyes summoning deep roots to claw at the wizard.

"You know," Harry opted for a diversion while he fought off the grasping roots, "Hagrid's class was interesting today."

"You don't say?" The Being distractedly pruned a Flutterby Bush. "What, Lykaeos turn up and one of his legs were actually missing?"

Willing the relentless roots to cease power and slink back underground, Harry directed vines to seize his tutor. "No. Your father taught us today. He was really good with Ensadius and he even let us ride them, and invited us over — "

"Harry," the Being visibly tensed, "I've been awfully stressed these last few months. Today is the first free day I've had since I arrived at Hogwarts." He turned impatiently to the Gryffindor. "The last thing I

want to hear is a list of the good deeds Saint Spiridon has done today. I'm sure the sob story regarding his daring rescue of the dying orphans on a school bus stranded in the midst of a monsoon can wait."

Harry bristled, gathering the power of earth into him and pitched it as hard as he could at Kaltag. "What's your problem?"

Unfortunately, the Celestial evaded the swirling orb and released an incredulous snort. "What is your obsession with my father? If you want to marry him, I'll let you know you're going to have tough luck getting past his wife!"

Harry shook his head with irritation. "He's been nothing but kind to me and Hermione and Ron. I only spent a few weeks at your home, but I can see he struggles to tolerate your attitude! He was never anything but patient with you."

Kaltag threw his hands up in a sign of aggravation. "Great! Another sympathizer. He just keeps gathering more and more in his little fan club. He's infected everyone."

"But not you."

"I know better." He chimed.

"I just want to know why you don't like him."

"Easy!" Kaltag hurled a ball of flames at him. Harry dived out of the way, hearing the flames engulf a number of plants. "He's never given me a reason!"

Harry didn't know why he was so angry, or why this conversation mattered, but he kept at it. Part of him truly wanted to delve deeper into Ron's words: how could such a brilliant pest come from such a generous man? "Something tells me you've never given him the chance!" He impatiently matched Kaltag's attack and their green orbs collided, showering sparks in midair.

"You can only give someone so many chances, Harry. Every time you do, you give them the power to tear you apart. To...to rip your heart to shreds." Kaltag made a distressed noise. He stared at the

ground, troubled and unseeing. Harry had never seen him so undone. It was frightening.

The plants in the conservatory had been stirring like mad and were now growing wild with their backlash of power. More than half the windows were shrouded in creeping plants, blocking out what little light there was to begin with.

"All he's ever had were chances! Chances mean nothing to me! You can't survive off of chances! You...you can't live off broken promises! It's never enough! I'm never going to be enough! All I've ever — wanted, I...You can't...I, I can't..."

Without warning, Kaltag's face darkened and he glared daggers at Harry, his control recaptured. The look he gave Harry was chilling; it reminded him of the look he gave Xenik after defacing him. Harry swallowed and steeled himself for whatever would come.

"You don't know me, Potter!" Kaltag rasped hotly. "So don't presume — " His eyes blazed fire, " — to think that you — " his arm reared back as the heat swiftly left the air, " — can analyze — " he hurled and Harry cast off his robes that had burst into flames, " — the farce of a relationship between my sire — yes, that's right, sire, since he's never been a sodding father to me! — and I, because — joke's on you — there isn't one!"

Sweat and fury surged about the Being in dangerous waves as his orange eyes bore into the wizard. Harry guardedly held his wand at the ready. Both boys panted for a few moments before Kaltag's sharp eyes reverted back to their usual shade.

When Harry studied his demeanor, he took in the tired, defeated stance. "Please, Harry," his voice quiet and ragged among the dying stirrings of the plants. "Let it go."

But something in Harry would not — could not let it go. There was a nagging feeling within him, one he just could not understand. "Your father is a good man!"

Kaltag puffed out a sharp sigh of exasperation, wielding the energy ball like a deadly weapon. "Because that's what he shows you! That's what you perceive! Perhaps you should take a look behind

closed doors to see how life really is." He narrowed his eyes into slits. "It's not all wine and roses, Potter. Unless the roses are black and the wine is poisoned. Put yourself in my shoes and spend a day with him, Harry — one full bloody day — and you'll see Spiridon Smythe for what he really is!" He capitalized on Harry's distraction by throwing a hard orb into his shoulder.

Harry leapt back to no avail, still getting clipped by the sizzling ball. Growling at the dead numbness beginning to spread, Harry grit his teeth and stretched out his hand, fiercely beckoning, "BIND!" The long rope of vine didn't hesitate to wrap around the seething Celestial, pinning him in place for a few seconds. He had willed the vine to be particularly tight, if only to keep him at bay.

When he spoke, it was low and reproving. "I can only imagine you see him that way because he probably didn't want your head to get any bigger than it already is." The Gryffindor mockingly smiled. "I'd say he's not doing a very good job of it."

"That's not it, Harry!" The Being struggled, loosening most of the twine.

"Oh?" Harry couldn't help but sound skeptical. "Then what is it exactly? Daddy didn't give you what you wanted, so you hate him and throw a fit proper for a first year?"

Kaltag infuriatingly groaned through his teeth, willing the vine to wither and die. He broke through and Harry wasn't ready for his quick assault. They shattered balls of energy, drawing power from the plants and Earth if only to vent their frustrations. Grunts sounded harder and louder, the forces of impact were greater on their targets and they even broke a few tables ducking and jumping and brawling.

The air was filled with constant sparks, their elemental powers clashing and reemerging for the same result. Harry could feel himself exhausting, and most of the plants were slowly wilting from expending so much pointless energy. Having not perfected his abilities, Harry was quickly tiring out; unfortunately for him, the Being had been trained in this for six years. Even his spells were losing intensity, and Kaltag was only sinking into the ground to dodge them.

Pursing his lips, Harry was determined to end this duel and make Kaltag see sense. "Why do you hate him?"

"Leave it alone, Potter!" Harry sidestepped a fireball.

"No!" He sent off a weak Stunning Spell, hearing it connect with a window. Before he could do another spell, he felt his wand escape his fingers and hear it slap in the Being's palm. "Git." He muttered. "Tell me why!"

"Potter, stop it!" Fire bowled into a plant near his head. There was desperation in the prefect's voice. Taking a deep breath, Harry rolled from behind a bench and stared his tutor down. Kaltag raised his fist, the ball of flames already burning brightly with the promise to hit its mark. "I'm asking you, Harry," Kaltag looked to be on the verge of flipping out, "to let this go."

Harry curled his fingers into fists, invoking an energy ball and narrowing his eyes. He squared his shoulders and raised his chin slightly. "No." The redhead's eyes thinned into orange slits, the ball of fire radiating intensity before Harry swerved to miss it.

He didn't expect Kaltag to charge at him with a raging battle cry. Harry, understandably shocked, could only throw out his hand in defense. He felt the energy orb fail him, tingling back into his arm and warming his entire body.

Harry closed his eyes expecting to be hit with fists or fire or spells, but all he felt was clammy, cool and wet. There was silence around him, and for a moment he thought had been knocked unconscious. Peeping open an eye to spot any raging Beings, Harry instead got a shock.

Rather than seeing the plant smothered, ruined greenhouse, he saw brown. Brown, everywhere. At least the Being was nowhere in sight. There were also thin weak vines, branching out from several thick core ones. He felt light as well. Startled, he opened the other eye, looking ahead. Yep, still brown. Below him, around him, right before his glasses, a transparent brown.

He couldn't see perfectly through the haze per se, but he could see more weak vines in the distance. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, he noticed a weird taste on his tongue that did not taste anything like his dinner. It almost tasted like...he restrained the urge to retch — dirt.



"By Zeus," Harry started at the sound of the voice surrounding him, and vaguely felt the lightness leaving his form. His eyes darted around to see the Being, but the cloud blocked everything out. "I think he's got it." Harry frantically looked around in the fog, desperate to defend himself from a surprise assault. When he couldn't see anything, he angrily stared above him.

And nearly choked on a mouthful of soil from his stunned gasp.

Before he could think — or die — properly, he felt a hand grab his and the feeling of tingly weightlessness was back, and he was moving, moving up. When his feet stopped prickling, Harry felt heavy once more before he was dumped unceremoniously on the ground. The wizard coughed, shaking his head and wiping his dirty face with equally dirty fingers.

After a brief coughing fit, Harry searched the room to land on that familiar face. "What — what — what — wha — ?"

Kaltag, despite his earlier murderous appearance, actually looked quite proud. "If you'd told me before the way to get you traveling was through a good scare, I'd have done that ages ago."

Harry spluttered out a mouth of dirt. "W — what? What?" He spat another muddy glob.

"You traveled, Harry. You traveled!" Kaltag slapped his back, all anger forgotten.

Harry blinked, wondering whether he heard right or not. "I...I traveled? Really?"

"Yes! You sank into the ground before I could reach you. And you held it quite good — well, you panicked at the end there; I suppose I could've been a bit more accommodating to your surprise — "

"So...so I traveled?" The wizard tried getting over his initial shock at finally succeeding. "And you didn't help me? And I just sank in there? And you didn't help in any way?"

Kaltag shook his head with a brilliant beam. "It was all you." The prefect thumped Harry on the back, who could barely take in his

surroundings as he was feeling fairly euphoric. He'd done it! He had earth traveled, not thinking too hard but focusing on one thing: saving his butt. "I'd reward you, but you've already got that DAFT pin of mine. Consider yourself rewarded."

Harry waved him off with a distracted smile. "Yeah, yeah."

"We've still got to work on your technique. Movement, visibility and sanitation, for one," he spoke in distaste, swatting a mound of dirt off his shoulder. Harry stood, brushing the dirt off his pants and shirt. "Yeah, that could definitely do with some work. You traveled, but you've still got a long way to go." Harry accepted the moist towel the boy gave him. He nearly flinched when he saw the amount of dirt he'd mopped off his face.

Harry elatedly opened his mouth to speak when he remembered something. With a smirk he raised a brow. "You were going to pin me?"

The prefect gave him a snide grin. "Nothing quite as ridiculously romantic as you perceive. I thought giving you a winged horse would be a bit over the top."

Harry's brow remained arched. "Pin me?" He fought the overwhelming urge to laugh. Kaltag looked less than impressed with his signature fake smile.

"Would you have rather me gift you with a plant? I heard Devil's Snare is quite popular these days." They momentarily shared a laugh before the exhilarated mood turned quite serious.

Harry fumbled with his towel, staring at the dark smears of dirt before he got the courage to continue what he'd started. "I still can't see reason in why you hate your father."

"Ohh! Can we please get off this subject?" The Being's posture straightened as he balled his fists, ready to fight again. "Why'd you have to go and ruin the moment?"

Harry clutched the towel in his fist and met the Celestial's even gaze. "I just want to know why you hate him so much." Kaltag scoffed and leaned over the nearest table. "I'm...I'm curious."

"Yeah, well you know what happened to that cat."

"He's never said or done anything to make anyone but you say otherwise about him. Whatever it is can't be as horrible as you're making it out to be."

"You don't live with him!"

Harry had had enough. Casting the towel aside, he clenched his fists tightly. "I may not, but your brother and sister do! And they've said nothing of the mysterious evil you go on about!"

The Being snarled, "Starbuck and Nikola are blind! They can't see past the Father of the Year image he paints for them on a daily basis! He's brainwashed them!"

The wizard found himself rolling his eyes, suddenly worn out. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Kaltag's voice now took on a seething quality. "He's treated them like royalty and me — the slave? And you call that ridiculous?"

"He's preparing you to take over the corporation! You said it yourself."

"That may be, Harry," Kaltag inhaled deep, seemingly to calm himself. "But he gifts them with things like a summer in Mykonos without his interference, and I've got to spend that same summer in his office meetings. What gives him the right to steal my adolescence?"

The Gryffindor nearly balked at the latter, but pursed his lips. "Like I said, he's preparing you. And I agree, it's not right for anyone to keep you from your childhood, believe me; but a lot worse has happened to others." He ignored the Being's derisive scoff. "But that's no reason to campaign against him and disrespect him like that; not when he's got your best interests at heart."

"Ha! 'my best interests'? Did he tell you that? Everything he says is a lie, Harry. Especially when it regards me."

"Pfft!" Harry shook his head and crossed his arms. "Adults lie, that's nothing new. Think about it: he's probably trying to keep you safe

from that...infiltrator or whatever for Mystikos. Especially since Mystikos is after you. Got anymore bright conclusions, genius?"

"Yeah!" Came the fierce reply.

Harry shrugged. "Go on. Enlighten me."

The Being opened his mouth to spitefully retort, but snapped it shut shortly thereafter. Harry could see his stoic mask barely slipping; the fretful gaze was a dead giveaway. "Don't do this, Harry." He quietly pleaded.

"Don't do what? Tell you the truth?" Harry felt as if he was suddenly steeped in Faryn's Influence all over again. "Tell you that you're being unreasonable and a jerk, because you don't get what you want?"

The wizard avoided a crackling orb. "Watch it, Potter." His tutor growled.

And then Harry suddenly understood why he had been so angry with the tetchy element lord. "Please! Here you are, with both parents still alive and you have the nerve to throw that insignificant fact away. With excuses, no less!" He scornfully mocked the elder student, chucking a return Earth energy ball. "So tell me! Tell me all about the big bad dark secret you're keeping about your father!" He hurled another and another, failing to note the speed and ease with which he had done so. "Tell me!"

Kaltag eluded a bruising sphere. "No."

The dark-haired wizard thoughtlessly motioned for roots to grab at the prefect's ankles. "Tell. Me." The Being quickly waved the attack away. Harry ducked and rolled out of the way of another flame.

"And I said no." Kaltag's cold tone persisted. His fists balled into bright conflagrations. "You'd better watch yourself, Potter. You're treading dangerous waters by provoking me."

Harry's only response was to narrow his intense green eyes. "No." For good measure, he drew more life from the plants and thumbed a sizzling orb in his palm.

Kaltag exhaled through his nose like a bull ready to charge. The crazy glint in his eyes spoke volumes to Harry; he was very close to cracking. His dangerously low tone said it all. "I'm not telling you anything."

Their orbs hurtled toward each other, fire and Earth violently crashing into oblivion, taking a hanging shrub with it. "Because there's nothing to tell!" Harry continued, fisting his hands. "You just don't want to admit that I'm right! That — "

"Shut up, Potter!" The plants all over the conservatory awakened around them in commotion.

"I don't understand! What could be so bad?"

"HE DOESN'T LOVE ME!"

Harry blinked, dropping his orb on the spot. The Being angrily panted, his burning fists snuffed out as he leaned against the table for support. He seemingly missed Harry's incredulous look. "What?"

"Yeah!" He harshly huffed. "I said it." Harry shook out of his stupor of confusion as a pot and plant whizzed across to shatter against something. "Spiridon — Smythe — doesn't — love me. Does that finally knock him off his pedestal?" Another plant sailed to its doom.

"H-h-hang on, hang on, hang on," Harry seized the prefect's shoulders and briefly shook him. "That can't be. You've got it all screwed up."

Kaltag grimly laughed. "I think I know him better than you."

Harry awkwardly patted the Being's shoulder, biting his lip. He shook his head. "I'm sure you've never told him — "

"I don't have to." The Being interrupted with a slight cough. "Actions, you know, they speak louder than words; but even so, he's never said it once."

"When you were a child — "

"No."

Harry resisted the urge to scoff. "You probably don't remember — "

"Never."

This time, Harry did scoff and move away from him. "Of course your father loves you!"

"Oh?" Came the caustic sound. "And you're an expert on Spiridon Smythe's spectrum of emotions all of a sudden? Because he taught you about a bunch of bloody horses you know everything?"

"No," Harry ground out. "But what I do know is with you, it's mouth off first, ask questions later. You never hear what he has to say. You never give him a chance!"

"Harry — "

"I know! I know!" The wizard irately threw up his hands, glaring. "'All he's ever had were chances', I heard you. But let me tell you something and let me finish," he savagely mocked. "I hear Ron, talking about playing chess with his father or Hermione telling us her mother's reaction to what her year was like and sometimes I just get...I dunno. Envious. Because I know I will never be able to do that."

Harry swallowed, vaguely wondering why all this bothered him now, nearing sixteen years after their deaths. "At times I would give anything to have my parents back, to take this all away if I could just know them. But you — you have that. And you waste it on anger, and — and — and tantrums and arrogance. If all it took was one chance, I would take it." Harry pursed his lips in a thin line. "I would give anything for a father."

The Being, who had looked sufficiently uncomfortable throughout most of Harry's tirade, stared at Harry under his brows. He simply muttered, "You and me, both."

Roughly running a hand through his hair, Harry fought the impulse to curse the Celestial. "I can't believe you!"

"Okay, okay, you want an insight to my perfect life? Why I should give him a chance?" Mocked the Being. "All right, let me enlighten you as you so wish, amazing Boy-Who-Lived. Tell me, Harry: Would

you forgive a man who shipped you off to boarding school — in a another country — when you were five? How about a man who only visits you at said boarding school twice — twice in the five years that you've been there? God forbid he comes on Easter: that's the annual company review! 'Screw my kids — I've got clients to please!' Would you still give him a chance?

"Or, how about this?" He darkly chuckled, his eyes glinting distress. "Would you forgive a man who showers his other children with affection and at times, presents, while the other is laved with duties? Meetings, paperwork, presentations, assessments — things other teenagers should never have to experience! Oh, and lest we forget he gave me a gift," he spat the word, "that could have led me to danger — which it did — and death, which it almost did. That's the ultimate act of love, wouldn't you say, Harry? Getting the child you claim to love with all your heart murdered?"

"Well, Starbuck and Nikola may be susceptible to his charm, but I see him for what he truly is: a manipulative bastard! You still want me to give him a chance, hmm? Call him father? Well, you know what? You can have him. I would gladly switch places with you if it meant I never had to see him again!"

The Gryffindor barely noticed the rampant energy of the foliage. Long had the plants grew wild and covered every inch of windows in the greenhouse, miming Harry's exact feeling: smothered. Smothered with the reverberation of anger, of betrayal, of the entire conversation, really.

He knew getting into this discussion would cause them both grief, but he just had to know. Was the Being right? Was the warm, benevolent general who had offered his friends his home, really everything his son affirmed?

"You talk about love, Harry?" The younger student shook himself from his thoughts upon hearing that defeated tone. "Love can't exist, when it isn't used in truth. If he loves me, he's got a damn funny way of showing it." The Celestial swatted at a plant, pausing just enough to restrain his uncontrolled power. The plants immediately ceased at his will.

Trying to wet his lips, but failing, Harry stared at his muddy shoes. "I...I know he's done bad things in the past — "

"Really, now?"

" — And you're angry and you have every right to be."

"Thanks for the permission."

"And you may hate him for how he's treated you." He ignored the redhead's disdainful sneer. "But regardless of everything, he's still your father, whether you like it or not."

Kaltag gave a short, mirthless laugh. "And I have to live with that fact for the rest of my immortal life. No matter what I fu — freaking do," Harry swallowed a laugh, "He'll always be there. And I'll always know. There's nothing either of us can do to change the fact he's my...my father." It didn't escape Harry's his fingers dug into the table rather painfully.

Futilely swiping a crust of dirt off his jeans, Harry leaned against the undamaged workbench. "Maybe," his emerald eyes considered the slumped sixth year, "you should take the first step." Kaltag remained motionless save his arcing eyebrow. "Do what," Harry paused to sigh, a slight niggling feeling of melancholy gnawing at him. "I never got to do."

He really was over his parents' demise, but he still felt the obvious lack of normality...save for a Dark Lord after his hide on a continual basis.

Kaltag softly grumbled, "At least you know your parents loved you."

"Your father..." Harry paused to collect himself. Snapping at the boy would get them nowhere. He sighed. "...loves you. And, so does your mother for that fact." Something twisted in his gut. Biting his lip, Harry turned to flick balls of dirt off his fingers. "Maybe it's you who needs to finally figure that out."

The two remained silent for a very long time, the slight rustling of the shrubbery breaking the stint from time to time. When the calm was finally broken it was from the sound of nearly unnoticed taps from the door. An urgent hoot later told them it was an owl.



When neither made an attempt to answer it, Harry rolled his eyes and opened the door, catching a flash of silver-white before the creature hooted impatiently. The owl gave Harry a fleeting look, suspicion rolling off it in waves. "Argentum's here." He quietly announced.

It was a beat before Kaltag nodded and he backed away from the table. He raised his chin and Harry noted the glassy, faraway look in his eyes. "Practice over the summer, and...try not to get caught."

Harry offhandedly agreed, leaning against the doorframe. The owl gave him one last leery look before it fluttered out the door. As Kaltag passed, he briefly met Harry's gaze. "Enjoy your date."

As if to convey no hard feelings, a feeble smile graced the Being's face as he returned Harry's wand. "Try not to get stuck between the flower patches. Good night." Harry nodded his dismissal and the door slammed shut.

With that, Harry turned back to the greenhouse, groaning at the disorderly state of it, and pulled out his wand to fix the damage that they had caused.

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Vine. A long rough rope of snapdragon lowered from the rafters.

Bind. It wrapped securely around a pot, shattering it with its force.

Up. The vine twitched. Up. It gurgled as it snaked back toward the darkened skylight. Wait...darkened?

"Oh, cripes!" Harry swiftly grabbed his ruined robe and bunched it under his arm. He was late! He didn't know how long he had remained after the Being left, but he guessed it would be an hour. Which meant the play was going to begin in less than half an hour and he was all muddy and sweaty and dirty.

Sprinting between the conservatories and up the small hill, Harry spotted the bright lights of the castle, and heard some of the chatter from the entrance hall. In the distance, he could see carriages lining the path to Hogwarts near the gates, stopping just short within reasonable walking distance of the school. He knew sneaking past

them was useless; he just had to bear the shocked looks he was sure to get for looking so grimy.

There was definitely excitement crackling in the very air. Guests, parents, officials and students lingered around the stairway, idly chatting on. Wiping at his face again, Harry forewent looking for escape routes and marched up the stairs. He was relieved to have reached the entrance hall without so much as a glimpse before —

"Harry!"

He groaned, wishing that for all the brains Hermione possessed, she would realize he really didn't want to chat right now.

"There you are! Where've you been? The Minister just arrived not too...what happened to you?" A few gazes slid in their direction, most doing double takes at his state of dress.

"Blimey, mate," Ron croaked. "What'd he do? Bury you alive?"

Harry tucked his tattered cloak underneath his arm nervously. "Yeah, something like that. Right, so I'm kind of dirty right now — "

"Understatement." Hermione cringed, pulling out her wand to spell it off.

But Harry dismissively waved, pushing past the throng of people. Most of them parted rather quickly when they spotted him, though. "I'm going to clean up. I'll meet you in the Great Hall. Save a seat for me, yeah?" He sent a last wave to his friends and trotted back to Gryffindor tower.

Most of the school was emptying into the Hall he concluded, since he hadn't encountered a soul in the corridor. Giving the password to an anxious Fat Lady, Harry raced up the steps and showered, blissfully washing all the dirt and grime away. His hair had taken quite a bit of work, but it was worth it; he'd earth traveled!

He hastily pulled on some clothes, Banishing filth and leaves off his shoes before grabbing the nearest cloak and throwing it on. Dashing out of the now vacant portrait, Harry gladly made his way toward the Great Hall, very behind schedule.

The halls, which before were echoing with the gossip of the guests and students, were now silent. Everyone was probably in their seats by now. He hoped McGonagall wouldn't take points off if he came in late; unless she wanted him to represent Gryffindor house in the same state he was in mere minutes ago. But, he mused, then he'd have to explain why he was so dirty. The less people knew about his new ability the better.

Arriving at the dim fourth floor, Harry suddenly remembered to clasp his top button shut. Most of the people he had seen arrived in formal robes, and even the students had looked a step above their usual dress. As he buttoned his collar, he felt his fingers brush something familiar and he froze. His DAFT pin! This was the robe he'd worn last week!

He almost unpinned the badge to dump in his pocket when he remembered: these were Dudley's good trousers...with holey pockets. And leave it to him to grab the only robe without pockets tonight. Groaning to himself, Harry had nearly turned right back to the tower, but remembered the Fat Lady had already left.

Accepting that luck was just not with him tonight, Harry decided to just run with Kaltag's story if he was confronted. After all, the Being did mention he would've pinned him tonight.

Harry had just started back up the corridor when he spotted a cloak swishing around the corner of another passageway.

Now ordinarily, Harry would have just ignored it and attributed it to a student wanting to skive off the drama. Or, if he were unlucky enough, he would have guessed Snape was stalking through the halls to make sure everyone was where they needed to be.

But it wasn't like Snape's ever-billowing cloak, or the normal thin material of Hogwarts' dress code. This cloak was thicker, heavier, and Harry held it to be fur-lined.

With that, Harry decided to follow.

After all, with all the guests in the castle, someone could have easily become lost in the maze that was Hogwarts School. Especially if it were a Celestial parent; one wrong turn and they were sure to find a hexed storage closet instead of the bathroom.

Quickening his pace, Harry crossed into the next corridor, squinting to see through the faint candlelight. "Um, sir? Ma'am?" He tried, but the person seemed to be moving at the speed of shadow. Every time Harry entered another passage, he only spotted the edge of the cloak wrapping round the bend.

He was really starting to get suspicious when they crossed into another abandoned hall. The lights were getting dimmer and dimmer with every bend, twist and turn. "Sir? Ma'am? If you're lost, I can take you back to the Great Hall."

When the flash of cloak skimmed another edge, Harry pulled out his wand. "Excuse me — " Before he could utter another word, he was staring down the barrel of a large black rod, much longer than a wand. The cloaked figure remained hidden in the shadows, a dead end most likely.

The figure gave the rod a sharp twist in his direction. Without warning a thick, black fog spread around Harry, blocking what little light there was left. The shadow also obstructed the flow of oxygen, mercilessly clawing its way through his nostrils, his throat and lungs, his brain...seizing his precious air. Harry grabbed at his throat, struggling to breathe, to cough, but horribly failed.

Choking on the smoke, Harry's shook his head to clear it as his vision watered. He couldn't....he had to warn someone...He stumbled back, heading for the exit since he couldn't cough out efficient spells. Maybe if he ran fast enough...

And then everything became hazy. His world gave a violent lurch on its axis and started to close in on him. Harry desperately tried to get away from the strangling fog, but his body rebelled, stiffening and finally, he fell backward.

The last thing he saw was the long metal rod tapping his DAFT prefect pin and he faintly heard a chuckle. The cold metal was suddenly scraping across his scar, he couldn't be sure anymore, he was so tired and...and confused.

And Harry's mind was washed in darkness.

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There were voices. Many of them, he didn't know. Hundreds, maybe thousands. But they were nowhere and everywhere all at once.

Hushed voices overlapped, eerie, speaking, whispering in ancient tongue, guiding him through the darkness, encouraging him, beckoning him closer. Harry's eyes darted all around him, seeing nothing but darkness.

Come closer.

Keep walking.

You have not yet arrived.

Harry rubbed his forehead, blinking into the darkness. What happened? Where was he? What was going on?

We are here.

Do not fret.

Fear not.

The hundreds of voices and no sight...Oh, God, Harry thought. I've gone blind.

Come!

He is here.

He has arrived.

There is much fear in him.

"Stop!" Harry frantically clapped his hands over his ears. "Who are you? Where are you?" He shouted into the echoing shadows.

Inside your mind.

Foolish boy!

The only place we can exist.

Bring him out.

And suddenly, the most earsplitting noise he had ever heard exploded through his senses. Harry's nails dug into his skull and he was sure he would draw blood. The roar of sound was high and shrill and deadly, like a mockery of the gentle song Fawkes would warble.

Harry yelled, squeezing his eyes shut and falling to his knees in endless darkness. Quite suddenly from the darkness sprang a whirlwind of color, streaking past him like a vortex. He quickly shut his eyes and waited for the wind to stop blasting past his ears.

Abruptly, all was quiet and a slight peaceful feeling washed over Harry, the most pleasant thing he'd felt since this encounter. Slowly, he pulled his hands away from his ears and slowly opened an eye.

He wasn't expecting to see dirt...and leaves...and a thick band of trunks and trees. If he didn't know better, he would think he was in the forest. Blinking open both eyes, Harry worriedly examined his surroundings. He was in the forest?

But...why? Why would the stranger send him here? He fleetingly wondered if he'd accidentally earth traveled or used his Elemental force or hit his head somewhere and this was all a dream.

It was then Harry got that unnerving feeling that he wasn't alone. That he was being watched, and very carefully. Swallowing what little saliva he had left, Harry wondered what horrible task was expected of him now. He didn't have to wait long.

"At last. 3200 years is quite a long wait..." a deep voice resounded, "...Golradir Celebrindal."

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A/N: (sings and dances) Oho! Oho! Oho-oho-oho! It's begun! It's begun! I can't say anymore; I'm too happy! Just get ready for all hell to break loose. Until next time folks, please read and review! I've found a lot of encouragement really eases the writer's block. That, and I'd like to know your thoughts. Honestly!

A/N 2: The Huntress is Artemis, Greek goddess of the hunt. She sort of seemed like someone who'd kick butt, so I used her.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Quintessence, Part I

Harry's heart plummeted. "What — "

" — did you call me?"

Harry jumped at the sudden onslaught of loudness ringing in his ears. Shaking away the brief dizziness the Gryffindor wheeled around to confront the noise head on when his jaw instantly dropped.

"Oh...my...God..." he breathed. "...Kaltagonus?"

The redheaded prefect didn't acknowledge him, nor did the others beginning to speak.

"What did you call me?" the boy demanded.

A whitish-haired old man, draped in robes of gleaming snow white against the dark forest shadows, stared down at the Being. "Your name." He simply answered.

Harry shook his head in disbelief. He was...he was...? "You're the Child of Phoenix?" He questioned. Still, he received no response as the Celestial and the man stared at each other.

Kaltag chuckled in amusement. "No, no, no. That's not my name..." his eyes narrowed and he thoughtfully folded his arms. "Although, it ... does sound familiar."

It was then Harry really noticed they were not alone. Six other gazes pierced through the boys (or just Kaltagonus) from their seated positions enshrouded in shadow. The man seated third from the left, somewhat younger than the first, sputtered indignantly.

"As it should, boy!" He impatiently barked, agitating his dark mane of hair. "It is your name!"

"No, no, I remember it now." Kaltag's eyes glinted with realization. Harry rolled his eyes and scowled.

"Oh, so now you remember that small, minor, insignificant fact that you're the Child?"



"That's the name...of. . . . " His eyes comically widened as he glanced at their expectant faces. One of the two women encouragingly nodded at him.

"Yes, strong one." Her sweet but firm tone approved.

The bearded man on her left leveled Kaltag with his confident dark gaze. "The Child of Phoenix."

Again, Kaltag's eyes widened to the size of saucers. "Yes, young one," the refined woman spoke again. "You are."

There was a pause. All was silent, and Kaltag's eyes seemed to have successfully mimicked the headlights on Mr. Weasley's Ford Anglia, as they were so large. Harry stood impatiently as the group of timeworn men and women awaited a reply.

And then came his response.

"Pfft!" His shoulders shook with mirth. Harry blinked owlishly at the boy, wondering if he'd finally lost his mind. At least he would have taken the news with a bit of dignity! The strange people did not look amused in the least.

"What ... what are you laughing about, you maniac?" Harry all but yelled. But no one even acknowledged him. It was then a small part in the back of the wizard's mind registered a number of possibilities as to why he went ignored. One came out the loudest. "Oh, hell! Am I dead?"

No one answered as Kaltag's body continued to wrack itself with guffaws. "Kaltag! Kaltag! Look at me. Look — at — me." No answer. Harry stepped closer, standing right in front of the highly amused Being. "Can you — can you see me? Hear me, even?" When he got no answer, he threw his hands in the air and walked away. "Cripes, like talking to a bloody monkey!"

"I can't ... believe ... " he choked between fits of laughter, "That you'd think ... that I ... " He bit his lip from wheezing so hard, "I ... I, ha, ha, ha...oh! That's classic, really!" The seven adults stared at him intently. "Did — did Stavros put you up to this? What did he slip into my drink, honestly?"

Harry stared at the Being in utter disbelief, scoffing in disgust. The most important information of the year was being delivered — by strange people in white robes, no less — and the idiot was laughing himself silly. He rubbed his head, feeling the makings of a headache.

The more unpleasant of the adults spoke again. "I fail to see the entertainment you find in this, boy. Countless lives lay at your feet at this very moment!"

The man between the older men, much younger than the impatient male, smirked and whipped some of his golden brown hair off his shoulders. "Never would I have dreamt of beholding the king of Mycenae concern himself on lives other than the poor soul currently warming his sheets." He smugly said.

The dark haired male snarled, his face turning an ugly purple, reminding Harry strongly of his uncle. "You treacherous — !"

"My kinsmen please!" The last man on the line interrupted. "This moment is not the time to revisit your rancor of old. The gods have foreseen this meeting at this precise occasion 3287 years ago. You shall settle your dispute when the gods will it, but not before then."

That seemed to shake Kaltagonus out of whatever laughing fit he'd been in. "Wait, 'gods'? We've not been called gods since ... I dunno, at least 1700 years, give or take."

Again, they turned their attention to the red-haired Being. The oldest man studied him closely. "Are you in control, Golradir?"

"It's Kaltagonus, thank you," the Being rudely corrected. "Not this Gol-whatever and definitely not the Child of Phoenix. You've got the wrong person."

"Oh?" The woman spoke once more, her eyebrow arched. "And whom is the real Golradir Celebrindal?"

Kaltag gave her a look as if it were obvious. "Harry, of course." The Gryffindor owlishly blinked. "Harry Potter. It's the most logical solution."

The wizard frowned at his tutor derisively muttering, "Thanks for the show of support, you prat."

But the assembly collectively smirked down at him. Harry had to admit, though some of them appeared kind enough, the fixed grins stretching their faces were unnerving. "No, child," the older man differed. "The Child of Phoenix is Blessed, gifted by the gods, and cursed with a terrible plight."

The Celestial nodded in certainty. "Yep, sounds like Harry in a nutshell."

Resisting the urge to dig his fingernails in his forehead Harry instead aimed a punch at Kaltag ...

... Only to watch his hand sail through the boy completely.

Staring at his hand in shock, Harry checked himself for any signs of phantom possession. Finding none, he hesitantly swiped his arm at the Being, only to get the same result. "Oh, God ... " he whispered in a hollow voice. " ... I've died."

Rather than deal with his supposed newfound death at the moment, Harry tuned back into the old man's speech. " ... The Child of Phoenix."

"Harry, you mean?"

There was a pause, broken by the russet-haired man. "No." He apparently paused for effect. "You."

Harry could tell the prefect was beyond annoyed. "You mean Harry." He insisted. "You know, that's the last time I drink anything from Stavros. He's always spiking things with Ambrosia. . . ."

"This is no trick of the gods, I assure you," the man at the far end patiently argued. "You, Kaltagonus, are the Blesséd Child."

"Gifted with the Strength of Achilles," the elder of the seven stood to his full height, gesturing to the light brunette beside him. "The Pride of Agamemnon," was the belligerent dark haired and bearded man beside Achilles. "The Cunning of Odysseus, the Persistence of Penelope," came the next two, the bearded brunette and the firm-spoken female at his side. "The Solitude of Andromache, and the Boldness of Hector." Hector slightly tipped his head to the wide-eyed

Being. "I am Calchas Thestórides, a Seer of Apollo, and your Wisdom."

The ginger-haired student stared at the assembly of robed persons with an expression akin to mixed awe and disbelief. When he snapped his jaw shut, Harry noted he wore a smirk worthy of Snape. "Well, well. I never thought I'd see the day when the Achæans and the sons and daughters of Ilium would sit together so ... peacefully. Especially when the ones who murdered you are but a few seats away." His eyes quickly shifted from Hector to Achilles.

"Hmph. What else do I have in me?" He mockingly resumed. "The Wrath of Antigone? The Temerity of Lysistrata? Well, hopefully not the Looseness of Helen. . . ." He scathingly laughed before craning his neck toward Hector. "Who's missing?"

Harry noticed there were indeed two empty spots beside the Trojan prince. "Mercy and Morality."

Kaltag snorted. "Naturally. Where is he or she or it? Pissing someone else off?"

"Morality — Cycnus, betrayed the Council to his father, who informed Mystikos." Odysseus grimly enlightened. "Betraying us, in turn, betrays you as well."

"So, what happened to Judas?"

"Cycnus, son of Ares, is dead." Agamemnon smugly chortled. "Trojan scum."

Hector stood in his chair, sharply jabbing his finger in the Mycenaean king's direction. "Keep silent before the Council if belligerence is what consists of your vocabulary!"

The white-robed spirits turned to Kaltagonus as he sputtered, "Cycnus? For Morality? Of all the Greeks and Trojans in history you picked Cycnus?" He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. "Just — just send me back. I-I-I-I don't think I can handle any more of your astonishing genius. Why am I here?"

Hector took his seat and scowled. Harry could see his fists clenching. Calchas raised his chin as if hinting at the significance of his next words. "We are the Quintessence. The Council of your soul."

"Oh God," He brayed. "I've got a seven-part soul? Will wonders never cease?" Harry really wished he were solid enough to punch the arrogant sod in the face.

"We are Phasma, of sorts." The first female — Penelope, Harry remembered — long-sufferingly explained. "Bodiless spirits, deep within the recesses of your soul."

Harry eyed the Being's incredulous nod. "Okay, and why am I here?" He repeated. Harry vaguely wondered the same thing: why was he here, when clearly they had no need of him? And how did he get here, and who was that stranger in the corridor? His mind fired off several questions, but he forced himself to return to the present.

"Several strange prophecies were made in our lifetime which went unnoticed due to other ... pressing matters." Calchas started.

The redhead curtly nodded. "The war."

Agamemnon snorted contemptibly. "Sharper than you look, you are."

"Pity I can't say the same for you." Kaltag returned, earning a glower from the former king of Mycenae.

"You mixed-blooded fiend!"

"Wow, your comebacks almost sting me, as archaic as they are."

Harry was startled when the shadowy world they stood in echoed with Odysseus's rich chuckles. "I like him." This also earned him a glare from Agamemnon.

"Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy primarily foretold of the ascension of the next king of gods and men of Olympus; a babe reincarnate, his soul balanced by the greatest of Greek and Trojan spirits — a balance in an extraordinarily unsound world. But blessed though she was, Cassandra incurred the wrath of Apollo and was cursed by the very gift he bestowed on her. All prophecies and

forecasts she uttered were to never be accepted as truth. Thus was the will of Apollo." Calchas gave the doubting Celestial a calculating stare. "Her words were spun into skepticism, though the foresight was confirmed by the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and myself."

"So sure of yourself, are you?" Kaltag rolled his eyes. "All right, now can you tell me why I'm here?"

Harry thought it was a trick of the light, but many faces in the Quintessence turned grim. Calchas looked much older, as old as Dumbledore as his lips thinned. "It is an affair of the necklace."

"The necklace?" The Being looked confused for a moment. "What neck — ohhh, no. You can't mean — "

"The worst kind of evil was unleashed when you activated the Scepter."

Kaltagonus growled and yanked at the chain, glaring daggers at the swirling black and red orb. "Why is this thing always coming back to bite me in the arse? Now what evil are you talking about?"

"The advent of this evil was hastened due to his feeding on the dark magic of the Ravenstone Scepter: it passed dark hands for several centuries before finding the right hands." Calchas's face adopted a troubled look. "Yours. You, Kaltagonus Smythe, were blessed with the greatest minds of the age to guide your journey."

"We've established that." The boy dryly replied.

"But the question that plagues you, is why," Odysseus continued, a smile playing on his lips. "Why are you here, why were you chosen, why you, and not Harry Potter?"

"You are the Child of Phoenix, Kaltagonus," Penelope reiterated. Harry's head was practically throbbing with that simple phrase. "But that designation is not the epitome of good it implies. We, the Quintessence, were drawn to you for an imperative matter: to prepare you for your confrontation with the one known as Golradir."

"But ... I thought you said he was the Child of Phoenix," said Kaltagonus. "Why would I fight him if he's the warrior for Light?"

"No," Calchas seemed to have gathered his wits. "Kaltagonus is the warrior for Light. Golradir ... Golradir is the warrior with no side, a Sanguinariu Bellotaur, and he has only one purpose in life," Harry vaguely realized he could now tell Hermione her suspicions were confirmed; the Child of Phoenix was one of the Bellotaur ... though of the evil variety. "To seek those who share his blood and kill them, and he would slay all in his path to find them."

Harry gaped. The Child of Phoenix ... was a killer? Kaltag seemed to have the same reaction on his face as well. "The Child of Phoenix is a killer? And you're saying I'm this Child of Phoenix? Are you mad? What about Youngblood's prediction? He said the Child was good."

Calchas raised his chin. "Areus Youngblood's prediction was a victim of time," he began. "His original forecast told of the 'two weapons used for peace, destruction wrought'. He spoke of a Blessed Child — you — and your bloodthirsty counterpart — Golradir. When his journals were deciphered centuries after his death, the prophecy was badly broken. His words on Golradir were lost, erased by time. Thus the fantastical warrior of Light, the Child of Phoenix was born ... its legend was the epitome of goodness."

"Inside you resides something so dark, so black with evil, even pondering it unearths dreadful recollections," Agamemnon harshly whispered. "A beast lives in you, boy, and you are hard pressed to stop him from taking over."

"Peace, Agamemnon," Andromache warned. "Leave the boy be."

"That is no boy!" The Mycenaean shouted. "That is a beast!"

Achilles scoffed. "You are more of a beast than he is at the moment."

"Arrogant — !"

"WOULD SOMEONE PLEASE TELL ME WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" Kaltagonus bellowed, his eyes wild and his face a mask of fury. Harry felt a faint shift in the atmosphere as the trees rustled and whipped.

"Peace, Kaltagonus," Calchas calmly drew the boys' gaze to him. "Your initiation of the Scepter released a dormant part of your soul, one that we have tried time and again to immobilize and have always succeeded, but alas, our last efforts were futile. With each passing day you grew stronger power-wise, the more Golradir fed off of your force. He is a parasite, Golradir; during the war he traveled all over the Hellas, slaughtering tribes, ravaging civilizations the world will never know, causing devastation in his path ... all while the gods' backs were turned. He murdered thousands."

"All of these people—killed? And no one suspected anything?" The Being asked skeptically.

"Plague, the will of the gods, enemy nomads at best." Penelope softly replied. "It was a time of war; no one had reason to believe otherwise."

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"Golradir was the killer with a thousand faces, a point in history never mentioned. Word of him spread across the land like the fires of Hephaistos' forge, yet no one had ever seen him."

Harry's brow creased in thought. If no one ever saw him, then how was he real?

"He would incapacitate his victims and take over their bodies, possessing them, poisoning their soul until he found the next victim, and the next one." Calchas continued. "No one survived ... until he stumbled upon the wrong city-state."

"Ithaca." Odysseus provided. "It was there his terrible reign ended. After the war concluded and its heroes departed for the Underworld, the Supreme Power locked Golradir away, never to be set free again."

"Okay," Kaltag stretched. "I'm still not seeing how anything Golradir does involves me."

Calchas gave him a calculating look, leaning forward in his seat. Harry swallowed; he didn't like that look. "Golradir ... is you."



The blue-eyed Being froze, narrowing his eyes at the Oracle. Harry couldn't quite believe it himself. He slowly shook his head as Calchas went on. "Golradir was released into this dimension with a scheme in mind: to find the rest of his brothers who share his blood and destroy them, so he would be the only supreme warrior in the world."

"He's got brothers?"

"Yes," Achilles' broad voice filled the dream world. "Six. He slew them all after they were forged, yet he still believes there are more out there."

Kaltag slowly shook his head. "He killed his brothers? And now he thinks there're more out there? We're following this psycho's paranoia?"

Harry was hard pressed to argue with the Being.

"I still don't understand: why does this affect me?" Kaltagonus prompted, his eyes glittering in his anger. "I don't have anyone in mind to kill—though a few of my mates could do with a good walloping most days."

Calchas pursed his lips tightly, raising his chin. "You are his host."

Kaltagonus coughed, staring at the Council in disbelief. "Host? You're telling me I've got the spirit of a paranoid parasitic warrior invading my mind and body?" There was a collective nod from the group.

"Not only a parasitic Bellotaur: the best and most powerful warrior since time began." When Achilles gave a snort of dissent, Hector glared at him.

Kaltag gave Odysseus and unimpressed look. "Still, there's supposedly a psychotic stiff's essence poking around in my body, and I don't like it one bit."

"As your power grows, the fight for dominance will commence. Golradir will make himself more known and attempt to overthrow you and recommence his life's mission."

"Uh-huh..." Kaltag nodded in a thoughtful manner.

"You are not only his host, but his balance: Light against dark, goodness against evil, morality against depravity."

Harry snorted. "They think you're moral? That's a laugh."

"Though with Cycnus as a Morality, I could definitely say the lines are blurred." Kaltag muttered. "All right, honestly, I haven't the foggiest who you people really are and you haven't given me a damn clue as to what the main answer to all of this is, so I can safely say I'm hallucinating. I've hit my head and I'm probably passed out in the forest somewhere lying in a pile of fresh troll shite."

"You are such a drama q..." Harry wrinkled his nose before coming up with, "Being." With a frown, the wizard sulkily crossed his arms.

Calchas inclined his head gravely. "There is more to discover."

"I'll bet there is," Kaltag mockingly replied as he walked toward the clearing's edge where the smoke weaved. "But you know what? I think you've got the wrong person. If I see Harry Potter on my way out, I'll let him know you're looking for him."

"Oh, thanks!" Harry cynically remarked.

"But right now, I'm late for a very important date, so if you'd kindly show me the exit, I'll get out of your hair." Harry couldn't believe the prefect was acting so nonchalant about this. To learn that the Child of Phoenix was not good was staggering; to learn that he was harboring the parasite in his mind was far worse. And all the Celestial cared about was a date!

Agamemnon snarled, slamming his fists on the table. "This is no matter of amusement, boy!"

"YES, it is!" Kaltag shot back. "For you imagine that I'm this Golradir who's a killer and an all around psychopath intent on destroying humanity is not only laughable, it's ludicrous! I am not the Child of Phoenix! H-Harry Potter is," he stumbled, straightening his robes. "And you've just wasted my time for nothing."

"Time is relative."

"And I'll be marrying one if I don't meet this girl on time, so where is the bloody exit?" Kaltagonus growled, pacing around the smoke, looking for an exit out of the smoky world. His eyes flared orange as something hindered his path. Kaltag smashed his fist against the invisible barrier. "Let me out! Put down this ward this instant!"

"You are afraid." Harry whirled around at the soft declaration from Andromache.

"Of her?" Kaltagonus replied. "Yes! Of a bunch of freaks in white robes? No, I'm not."

"There is fear clouding your mind ... and your heart." Kaltagonus faltered in treading the clearing's perimeter. "You fear the truth ... because you know we are correct. You have known for a while that you were not normal." The Being twitched, but did not reply. Harry eyed Andromache's sympathetic smile. "It is frightening to realize your mind has been breached; to know your control is wavering ... to feel it slipping in your grasp. You are alarmed of what you are turning into ... Golradir."

"Shut up." The redhead breathed, his face turned away from the Quintessence. "You have no idea what you're talking about." Harry watched as his shoulders tensed even more. The black-haired wizard narrowed his eyes: were they really telling the truth?

"Kaltagonus," Odysseus sternly called, "We are not releasing you until you know the whole truth. From this point on your entire life will change ... and not for the better, I fear." Kaltag still kept his back to the Council. "You deserve to know the truth behind Golradir's origins, and why he selected you of all people. You do not want to enter into this blindly, young warrior. If you do, the consequences will be more disastrous than the wizard war itself."

The Being's next words stunned Harry. "I can control it. I stopped it from killing Androcles, didn't I?" So they were telling the truth. Kaltagonus' control was being challenged. Harry swallowed.

"Yes, you did," Achilles insultingly acknowledged. "But what about the next time? Will it be enough?"

"There is no reasoning with Golradir," Odysseus resumed. "He takes what he wants. If he desires your soul, he would have it and you would fail to thwart him. To understand Golradir, you must first understand who you are; who you were born to be." Kaltag's shoulders hunched. "Please ... you shall fare far better against Golradir if you remain here. The world cannot survive another period of his carnage."

The weight of the atmosphere seemed to settle on the Being's shoulders as the Council waited for his response. Harry swallowed thickly, his eyes darting between the Quintessence and the Being. He had to know more about this Golradir. If Voldemort ever found out about him, Harry was certain the world would come to an end. He was suddenly glad for whoever had sent him here for whatever reason.

At long last the Council, waiting with baited breath, stirred when Kaltagonus squared his shoulders and stared into the murky darkness between the trees. From the slight jerk of his shoulders, Harry could tell he was breathing heavily. Slowly, his pasty face came into view, his eyes standing out more than ever. He calmly licked his lips, averting his eyes toward the forest floor. "And if I don't want to do this?" He quietly asked.

Agamemnon sneered. "You do not have a choice, boy."

Kaltagonus' eyes suddenly turned hard. Harry gave a weak smile at the familiar anger in them. "There's always another choice, Sunshine. Now shut up, I didn't ask you."

"Why you ill-mannered — "

"I said," Kaltagonus easily overrode his hollering, "Shut...up."

Achilles smirked and tipped forward to glance at Odysseus. "I do like him." Odysseus grinned in response and the rest nodded in agreement. Harry vaguely noted Achilles was a man of few words, but his opinion was highly valued.

With another nervous gesture, Kaltagonus eased away from the border and made his way back to the center of the clearing. "While I don't accept or believe all of this yet," he made clear as soon as he'd stopped, "I think it's in my best interests to ... hear you out. I don't

suppose you could conjure me a chair or something?" The Quintessence didn't budge. "Right, then. Anyway, learning never hurt anyone, right?"

The faces of the Quintessence tightened in an unmistakable grimace, and the women offered the Being a look of sympathy. "That, young warrior, we cannot promise." Calchas dourly clarified. Harry saw Kaltag's throat bob in apprehension.

"Are you prepared?"

Harry watched the Being undergo a range of emotions, all flickering behind his eyes as he readied himself for the worst. Harry suddenly felt very sympathetic toward the Being. Kaltag nodded once.

Calchas bleakly smiled. "We know these events, and we have seen them unfold. Since Golradir is part of you, they are in your mind; all we must do is retrieve them."

The prefect looked apprehensive. "In ... my mind? I'm not sure I'm all right with that."

Once again, Agamemnon released a huff of irritation. "For Zeus' sake, boy—"

"Would you shut up already?" Kaltag snapped.

"How dare you!"

Achilles quickly glared at the king. "The boy told you to keep silent. Keep silent." When the cantankerous spirit opened his mouth to squabble, Achilles taunted, "Shall I fetch Clytemnaestra?" This immediately shut him up. Kaltag gave the famed warrior an appreciative nod.

"Golradir's memories are your own, but you need assistance in recovering them. Once that barrier is broken, you will relive all of his memories, from his slayings to his death." Kaltag mutely nodded.

"But ... if he's a parasite living off of me, why do I have his memories? Parasites usually don't keep any recollections."

"Ah, the mystery unfolds," Odysseus mischievously smiled. "You see, Golradir was not originally a parasite. Golradir was once a separate essence. The two of you did not meet until the womb."

Kaltag blinked in bewilderment. Harry mimed him, blinking with a furrowed brow. The womb? "You were born with him?"

Calchas gently tilted forward. "You were separate essences, separate spirits, linked by the same prophesied destiny. When Golradir's first plan did not succeed he moved to find another host to take over, a womb to invade and in turn, take over a babe."

Kaltag's expression darkened as he pensively nodded. "To start over again with a permanent disguise."

Penelope's eyes crinkled in the corners. "You are beginning to remember."

When Kaltag failed to reply, Calchas continued. "Golradir was forcibly removed from his first host's womb for reasons we shall unravel in the near future," he firmly said. "But the next womb he raided, he found a worthy specimen: weak, nearly lifeless, but full of potential. Confident he could mold and shape the host to his predilection, Golradir fused himself to the babe.

"What he did not expect was the babe's dominant personality." Calchas inclined his head, staring at the Being over his wrinkled cheeks. "He was overwhelmed by your will to live." Harry glanced at Kaltag from the corner of his eye. He hadn't moved. "Thus he was forced to concede to you for the time being, and he merged himself to you to become one body and two souls. The humans now have a name for this condition: chimerism."

"So I'm a byproduct of faulty genetic engineering? Twin to twin transfusion at its worst." Mocked the prefect. "How sound."

"Thus the first part of the prophecy was fulfilled: the two extremes were forged," said Hector. "But contrary destinies, like spilled blood, have ways of entwining. You may be the balance of Golradir, but there must be some thing, some ... entity, some person that balances you."

"I get the feeling you're referring to something much bigger than chimerism." Muttered Kaltag as he blearily wiped his eyes. "I take it you know who or what my balance is?"

Odysseus' grin was impish. Harry suddenly did not like where this was going. "Potter." Harry flinched at the mention of his name.

"Harry?" Kaltag inquired. "What's he got to do with this?"

"Yes, what do I have to do with this?" Harry chimed in, fully aware they couldn't see or hear him.

"Not the Dark Lord's adversary." Odysseus shook his head. "Lily Potter."

Harry's head was suddenly buzzing with alarm. His mother? What did she have to do with Golradir and prophecies? From the little he'd heard about his parents, nothing of the sort ever came up. So just what did his mother have to do with this? His brow lowered, Harry budged closer to give his full attention to this explanation. He was not going anywhere until he found out why his mother was so significant.

The Being frowned in perplexity. "His mum? What about her?"

Ominously shifting forward, Calchas gravely replied, "Everything, young warrior. Everything." At Kaltag's befuddled look, he raised his chin. "Perhaps then, we should begin with Golradir's first victim."

Without warning a fierce gust raged through the trees, shaking leaves all around the clearing. The wind swept past Harry's head in a deafening roar, forcing him to slap his hands over his ears. The forest began to blur in his vision and the Council fogged out of sight, disappearing in a whirlwind of color.

A second later, Harry and Kaltag vanished from the clearing.

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(Origin Alley. Tuesday, October 31, 1978. 9:03 PM.)

The violent squalls suddenly stopped and the sickening cyclone of colors settled when Harry opened his eyes. The Quintessence was nowhere in sight, but they were now in a strange new world.

"...I dunno why the git called me, honestly! And I blame you for dragging me into this!"

Harry spun around to the voice echoing from the entrance in front of him. He briefly noted they were in a large, strange place screaming of disorder and chaos, the air smelling heavily of burnt wood.

"You're not a curse breaker. I'm not even an Auror — not even out of my internship with a completely different department, and whom does Connelly send? Me!"

"Well, we're the closest thing they've got to it tonight. And he made a great choice in sending you in, a very smart one." A gentle, feminine voice replied with a hint of pride.

A derisive snort followed. "Not likely. The man's so stupid he could eff up a wet dream, no joke."

"James..." A stern, feminine voice warned.

"What?" James Potter finally came into view, hair as messy as Harry's and similar face twisted in annoyance. He looked barely older than Harry was at the moment. "I've a right to be upset, Evans! Calling me from our home in the dead of night for some job — " He spat the word with contempt. Harry's heart skipped a beat; it was a memory of his parents!

"Eight o'clock hardly qualifies as the dead of night."

"Which I didn't even want, but you — yes, you insisted loafing about and putting my inheritance to use would not bring as much satisfaction as having to earn my keep through hard work. Well, whoever invented the concept of manual labor needs a straight Avada Kedavra between the eyes."

"Well, someone needed to deflate your fat head somehow." Came her sharp reply.



James glared at the woman before turning his heated gaze to the room. "Disrupting my evening for some — some ... stupid prank!"

Harry bit his lip at the sound of an amused giggle. He was finally glad to see a memory where his parents weren't at each other's throats ... or battling dark lords. When Lily's red hair came into view, he felt a bothersome tug at his heart. "Then you should feel right at home, Potter. I seem to recall pranking is your specialty, is it not?"

James scoffed, scowling petulantly. "There's a difference; I prank for fun; as former Head Girl, you should be smart enough to figure that out." Lily scowled at his back. "This is no prank. Besides, my department specializes in Ma-gi-cal Ac-ci-dents that occur in the Mug-gle world." He argued as if speaking to a five-year-old.

"Think, James: Origen Alley is the end of the Alleyways; the next street over is a Muggle one. What if someone heard something — or worse: saw something? We can-not risk the ex-po-sure of our so-ci-ety." Lily mimicked, hands firmly planted on her hips.

James scowled at her ridicule, but nodded begrudgingly. "You have a point; but I still think he did it for spite. I mean, it's bloody Halloween! Everyone's out tonight!"

The witch nodded, carefully studying a broken figure. "Precisely. Everyone is out. Everyone but us. We were probably the only ones they could reach."

"Yeah," the hazel-eyed wizard snorted. "The only suckers staying in."

Lily's eyebrow rose as she stood from her crouched position. "Are you complaining about spending time with me?"

James's eyes comically widened behind his round spectacles and he smiled; though to Harry, it came out as more of a grimace. "Never, Lily Green-Eyes." Harry rolled his eyes at how docile James seemed under Lily's firm look. He turned from Lily's scrutiny to survey their surroundings. "I'm only saying it's not fair. We're not supposed to be here for a stupid robbery: we're not on call! And . . . . Blimey, they really did a number on this place."

Harry's eyes briefly caught sight of the Celestial a good ways behind him before he got a proper look at where they had been sent. The museum, he absently mused. This must be the museum Sirius was talking about.

The place was ransacked, viciously raided. Things were toppled over, objects broken in shards on the floor, tapestries ripped and smoke issued from various burnt objects that looked older than time itself.

"I know," Lily forlornly replied, shaking a scorched book out from under splinters of glass. "It's terrible. All of these artifacts, these bits of history that helped forge our world ... destroyed. A senseless act." James recognized the gloomy expression on the redhead's face and immediately crunched over broken glass, wood and brick to comfortably rub the witch's arms.

"These Death Eaters, or whatever it is they call themselves," he began after a pause, "why do you think they would do this? There are other ways to celebrate Halloween. Knocking off a museum isn't exactly what I call thrilling."

Lily heavily sighed, setting the book down. "Well, that's what we're here for, yes? To figure this out. And to glean whatever information we can for the Order." James seemed to straighten at the mention of the organization. Lily's eyes darted around as if to make sure they were alone. "Voldemort's followers had to have done this for a reason."

"Yeah, but what would he want with rusty old artifacts? Even infused with old magicks, I doubt they have much power in them."

Lily's brow furrowed. "We'll just have to figure it out while we're here." James simply shrugged, smiling at the girl consolingly. "I should start checking for signatures of unfamiliar Curses and Charms." Reluctantly, James nodded and released her from his embrace, but not without a short kiss. "James!" the emerald-eyed witch blushed, her tone one of scandal. "Not while we're working." He didn't look in the least bit repentant, deliberately rumpling his hair with a smirk.

Harry absorbed every instant of the memory he observed, happy to have something other than pictures of his parents' lives. His mother

was carefully pointing her wand around the large room, muttering Latin under her breath and sweeping her wand over artifacts. James, on the other hand, was sifting through the rubble, much to Lily's chagrin. "James! Don't touch anything! That's the Aurors' job."

"Look here, Evans! Montague Knightley's champion chess set." He examined the charred pieces. "Hm. They'd make great throwing stones, now." The chessmen heatedly protested as he tossed them over his shoulder.

"James!" Lily hissed through clenched teeth. "Stop that! I don't want the Aurors getting upset that we made a mess of the scene!"

James gawked as if she were crazy. "Made a mess of the scene? Are you serious? Have you seen this place? The way I see it, if we muddle it up, it'd look better." He pointedly ignored her black look. As Lily went back to searching for curses, James poked around the wreckage for more things. His eyes brightened as he found something else.

"Evans? Evans! Hey, Green-Eyes! I'm a samurai! SWISH! STAB! BLEEEED..." He swung the katana like a madman. Harry couldn't help but laugh. The unusually silent Being chuckled as well, albeit nervously.

"Potter!" The wizard in question spun on his heel and wobbled under the blade's weight. When Harry eyed his mother's features, he could tell his father was in deep trouble. Lily's eyes were stormy as her hands were fixed on her hips and her mouth was pressed in a thin line. "Put—that—down."

James frowned apologetically, setting the sword where he'd found it. After a hard look from the witch, they resumed their scanning. But James hadn't abandoned his snooping yet. His hazel orbs rounded and he theatrically gasped as he uncovered yet another artifact. "No! The first Nimbus created by Devlin Whitehorn!" He held the fragmented pieces of wood up for her to see. His face contorted in rage. "What type of cruel, soulless human being did this?"

"James!" She whispered urgently.

"This is unacceptable!"

"Potter!"

"Lily, can't you see I'm in...mourning...here?" He trailed off, his teasing tone adopting a serious quality as he discovered they were no longer alone.

The stranger had a look that reminded Harry firmly of a walrus, with his sizeable midsection, graying handlebar mustache and well-polished monocle as he clutched the lapel of his frock coat. He graced the messy-haired wizard with a cross look. "The museum is closed."

"Ah." Adequately mortified, James carefully set down the bits of wood and smiled in a pained fashion as he advanced to Lily's side. "James Potter. Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes." He flashed an official Ministry badge before tucking it away. "This is Lily Evans, interim curse breaker from Experimental Charms."

The man puffed up, ignoring James' extended hand and rumbled superiorly, "Barclay Gillpatrick, curator. Potter, you say?"

"Yes, sir." Harry could see some of his father's old arrogance stir at the recognition.

"I knew your father, boy. Good man. One of the Foundation's greatest contributors." James didn't even blush at the remarks. "Though I see the apple has fallen very far from the tree, indeed. I knew the Ministry thrived on incompetence, but they've obviously outdone themselves."

James instantly sobered, and Harry could see he was restraining himself from offending the man. "We were told there was a raid?"

The curator curved a shaggy eyebrow. "No, I called you here for tea and a rousing match of Gobstones!" He scorned, his face purpling in annoyance. "What do you think I called you here for? Incompetence!" The large man thundered incoherently before plodding away, his mustache nearly curling at the ends in anger.

"Er...we'll just interview your workers, yeah? Thanks . . . ." After he had stomped out of sight, James let out a breath. "Well! Anger management, anyone?"

Lily's brow furrowed. "Be reasonable. The place was just ransacked. Countless inestimable artifacts could have been taken and he'll probably never get them back."

"No reason to blow up at us. He insulted me, Evans."

She sighed, looking as if she wanted to disagree with him but thought better of it. "I'm fully aware. Just ... try to at least be sympathetic." She entreated, running her wand over a display table.

The wizard sneered, "Sympathetic? How can I when the man reminds me of a Slytherin?" Lily only rolled her eyes. "Must be one himself."

"James, behave."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he dismissively waved. "I'll go interview the workers."

She gave his retreating back a dark look. "And remember to — "

"Behave, yeah. I got it, Green-Eyes." A grin broke over her face as James maneuvered around a collapsed tapestry.

Lily waved her wand over once venerated artifacts — now hideous paperweights — to find weak or broken protective wards or the occasional Dark spell. Harry studied his mother, watching her every move as if the memory would soon end. He quietly smiled to himself; it was memories like this a magical photograph could not capture: his mother's brow creased in concentration, his father taking his job with a grain of salt. The young Gryffindor shook his head. He'd go over the memory later; now was the time for observation, not nostalgia. There was something here the Quintessence obviously wanted them to see.

His mother had just brushed away dust and bits of wood off an otherwise unbroken display case as James walked back into sight. "Oi, Evans! Guess who's enslaved here!"

A pimply youth nervously ran his fingers through his brown curly hair and smiled crookedly at Lily. "Er, Miss Evans."

The red-haired witch returned the smile. "Boyd...Macduff, right?" She nodded as he muttered a response. "I know I tutored you in Charms, but you needn't call me 'miss'."

He blushed as he vigorously nodded. "All right, lass."

"Lily." She firmly corrected, smiling.

"Sorry."

"There's another witness in with Mr. Tetchy right now. Meanwhile, old 'Muggle Macduff's' told me some interesting things."

The lanky man vigorously nodded. "I was polishin' the cases like the guv'ner asked me to — "

The black-haired wizard scoffed. "More like brayed..."

"When I heard a noise outside. Like, I dunno ... a whooshing sound?"

Lily looked puzzled. "Whooshing? Not like Apparating? They must've arrived on brooms."

"S'what I thought meself. But they didn't leave on them, I didn't see any out there." The Gryffindors exchanged a suspicious look. "But they all rushed in and one was leadin' 'em, fer sure. It were odd, it was; he or she were the only ones breakin' and destroyin' things. The rest sorta followed 'em in, making noise and tha's about it. I'd think the Death Eater sort'd be raisin' all hell, but it were just the one."

"But here's the interesting part. Tell her, Duffy."

The pimpled wizard glanced around as if to look for spies. "I seen the leader with a very curious wand, I did. Black, a rod o' some sort. Looked heavy. Metal, I suppose. Very destructive. Put the fear o' Jaysus in me!" He nervously chuckled.

Harry's brow furrowed as he thought back to the corridor attack on his way to the drama. It was dark, very dark, but he remembered the person who attacked him had a similar wand: weighty-looking, metal

and definitely black. Could it be the same person? If that was true, was there a Death Eater now loose at the school?

"Very curious." Lily agreed. James briskly nodded.

"Go on, tell her the rest."

"I thought they'd be takin' everything in sight; got a lot of wicked things in 'ere that'd cause some massive hell in the wrong hands, or so me guv says." He crossed his arms as his face contorted in deep thought. "But he wasn't goin' fer the daggers and swords and the like. In fact, just as I pulled out me wand — didn't want to go down as a coward or th'ars shame to be had — I felt me a snell wind and he reached for summat. Odd, it was."

"Do you remember what it was, Boyd?"

"Aye," he nodded once. "The old Unfathomable."

Lily blinked, her eyebrows lowering. "The orb?"

"Aye." Boyd nodded again. "Dunno what they'd want with that useless ball o' smoke. Anyone with sense enough would know iss a waste o' time. Never got it, though. Dropped it when he spotted me, he did. Me Mam will see me a hero on tomorrow's Prophet, she will! Who'd have thunk — me, Muggleborn an' all, scarin' off this Who-You-Know's — "

"You-Know-Who."

" — His followers. A right hero, I'll be!" He smiled crookedly, snapping his bright suspenders with glee. They quietly thanked the young worker and dismissed him to send the other eyewitness out. It wasn't long before another surprising, yet familiar face made it out into the museum. Out of sheer curiosity, Harry wondered just what the man was doing here.

He noticed Kaltagonus finally reacted as a somewhat younger Spiridon emerged, surveying the scene in pity. James looked positively ridiculous with a mock-serious expression and a pad and quill poised; Lily nudged him in annoyance. Spiridon greeted them with a nod of the head and continued eyeing the scene.

"James Potter, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. Lily Potter, Experimental Charms Investigator and acting curse breaker for the hour. Let's start with your name?"

"Spiridon."

"Spiridon what?"

"Simply Spiridon." James raised a brow in Lily's direction. They shared a puzzled look, though Lily's seemed more suspicious than befuddled.

When he spoke, he sounded vaguely amused. "Oh, I see. Are you a Seer? Like Cassandra or Sibyll? Just one name, Simply Spiridon?"

Spiridon did not look amused in the least. "Just one name." He carefully replied. Harry watched as his father eyed the self-dictating quill circumspectly.

"And what was your business here at the museum tonight?" Lily took over.

"I was just passing through Diagon Alley when I heard great commotion. As an enforcement officer, it is my duty to investigate."

"Enforcement officer?" James asked at the same time Lily replied, "You're a long way from Diagon Alley."

"A military officer." Spiridon held up a brown sack for all to see. "I had to stop by the Madison Alley apothecary for a few herbal components for my wife." The Celestial's mouth formed a thin frown. "She has not been feeling well of late."

James nodded, his face a mask of sympathy as Lily narrowed her eyes. "May I see your purchases?"

"Lily..."

"That's fine." Spiridon interrupted before the two could begin arguing. Carefully taking the bag, Harry shifted closer to the trio. He'd noted Kaltag had long marched over to them, studying the memory's occupants attentively.



James alternated between glaring at his fiancé and grinning apologetically at Spiridon, who was checking his watch. The redheaded witch carefully opened the bag as if she expected to be hexed the moment it was unfolded. When nothing of the sort occurred, she called the contents aloud.

"A stalk of valerian root, a clove of ginger and some chamomile." She closed the bag and absently looked at the still erect display case, a reflective gleam in her eye. The witch snapped her gaze to the dark-haired Being. "Hm. Sounds like she has an unsettled stomach."

Spiridon arched his eyebrows in an impressed manner. "She had a bout of nausea this morning."

James frowned. "I hope she feels better, mate."

"Thank you for your kindness," he nodded to James before smirking at Lily. "You are a very smart girl."

"Woman." She quickly corrected. "And that's an awfully big bag for three small items." Her fierceness showed Harry just how uncomfortable she was with the Celestial. But for the life of him, Harry couldn't understand why. She hadn't treated the other witness this darkly.

"I did not have a choice in the way the storeowner preferred to stock my purchases." The Being smoothly countered.

James tousled his hair after ripping a page out of his notes and crumpling it. "True. They just give you what's at hand, yeah? No crime in that." He pointedly looked at Lily, who was studying Spiridon more closely than before.

"As I was saying before, I came round to see what the fuss was about. I saw a few men running deeper into the Alley. Whether it was two or more, I can't be certain; it was dark and with their dark cloaks, it might as well have been one or six of them."

"You didn't hear anything? They didn't say anything strange?"

The Being shook his head, glancing at his watch again. "No. How long will this take?"

The hazel-eyed wizard crossed something out in his notes. "Until the Aurors arrive. Why? D'you have somewhere you need to be?"

"My wife." He reminded in slight annoyance.

"Wife, you say?" Lily crossed her arms and stared at the hand holding the brown bag. "I don't see a ring."

Spiridon's smirk was one formed out of provocation. "Mother Hera does not bear a ring, but we do not question if she is married to King Zeus, yes?" The redheaded witch arched her brow, unimpressed. "As it is, our rings are being crafted by my lady's relation as we speak. I do prefer a physical reminder of my marriage regardless of her remonstrations."

"Ha, 'Mother Hera and King Zeus'," James snorted, shoulders shaking in mirth. "You speak as if you know them." Kaltag rolled his eyes and muttered something unintelligible. Like with the Quintessence, they didn't seem to notice his presence.

"Indeed." Spiridon inclined his head. "They are my kinsmen."

James coughed. Lily's brow sharply curved. "Your relations?"

"My wife's father and non-blood mother." He checked his wristwatch as a sign of impatience. "When will your Aurors arrive? I wanted to hear her verdict from the Mender."

James clapped his mouth shut as soon as it started to gape. Lily's green eyes were still narrowed in disbelief. "You're a Celestial?"

The man in question timidly smiled. "Guilty."

"Aren't there apothecaries on Olympus then? Why come to the Alleyways to get three things?" Harry's mother's voice hinted accusation.

"Valerian root is very hard to come by at the agora. One of your own suggested the poultice-maker's — is it Avery's? — shop in Madison Alley."

"And who — "

"That's enough questioning," James cut in, ignoring the witch's dark look. "I'm sure the Aurors will have a few more questions for you. For now, please return to the curator's office. Thanks for your time." With a sharp nod Spiridon trekked through the rubble toward the back corridor and out of sight.

James scratched out another word from the dictating quill and snapped the notepad shut, running his hands through his disheveled hair as Lily heatedly checked more debris for charms. "Evans? You want to tell me why you were grilling the god back there a moment ago?"

She waited for a blue glow to flicker over a rusted axe before she faced him, her expression aggravated. "I still don't understand why he would come here of all places. There are perfectly good apothecaries in Greece or Olympus or wherever he's from."

"You heard him," James shrugged. "Valerian root is hard to come by."

"And you believe him?"

"Yes, I believe him."

"Well, I don't."

"The Ministry is paying us to assess the situation," he reminded. "Not be detectives. That's what Aurors are for." He cringed as Lily roughly applied a spell to Whitehorn's Nimbus. It cracked into several more pieces. Lily was definitely angry.

James huffed, rubbing his eyes tiredly under his glasses. He'd obviously done this before, Harry mused. "He's a Celestial, Lily; do they really need a reason to be anywhere?"

She turned angry eyes to him. "Just because a few of them have slightly more power than us and have had fawning stories written about them and their promiscuity," James appeared to have stopped himself from rolling his eyes during her rant, "does not mean they're better than us." In an angry swirl of robes, she went back to running tests.

The young James' eyes rounded somewhat, his face frowning in confusion. "Wow, Lily. You're really taking this to heart. I mean, he never even said anything about being better than us and he's got you all ... hot and bothered." He smiled wickedly and advanced on the furious witch, rubbing her arms soothingly. "Tell me how to make it all better, Green-Eyes."

He nearly spluttered in alarm when she shrugged his hands off. "For once, get your head out of your pants, Potter!" He sulked, hunching his shoulders and crossing his arms. Lily looked completely unapologetic (both boys were highly amused at James's rejection), her brow wrinkling in suspicion. "Something just doesn't add up about his story." At her companion's snort she scowled.

"You're being paranoid." He shook his messy head and crouched over a pile, swiping at broken pieces of wood and glass. "It's Halloween; it makes everyone second-guess every bloody thing in the world."

"That's not it." She softly countered, turning her back to him to test more artifacts.

"I never pegged you for a superstitious one, Evans."

"I'm not." She insisted, almost affronted. "Perhaps you don't have me pegged at all."

James paused, a deformed silver chalice in hand. "Well, we have done plenty of physical pegging this past year," Lily fumed, turning red. "But trust me: I'll know you better than your own mum. We've got plenty of time to make up for the, what ... five years you hated me at Hogwarts?"

It was Lily's turn to scoff. "Six. And that was your own fault, Potter the Pitiful." He paused again, tossing a matching plate to the side. His eyes were curious.

"Wait a ... you're the one who started that? I spent all seven years trying to figure out who started that up."

Harry wistfully smiled at his bickering parents, the moment only ruined when he tried to lean on the display case only to fall through.

Apparently, they lacked density in memories. With a scowl, he stood by it.

Lily secretly smiled at James' accusations. "You will never know."

"Right," James acknowledged, closely studying an irreparably cracked Sneakoscope. When it appeared he was staring at it, waiting for a response and receiving none, he finally tossed it aside. "Broken, this one."

"James, what have I told you about — "

"Eh, there's something down here." His eyes squinted and he pulled out his wand, carefully Banishing the debris. Harry warily made it over to his father's side, peeking over his shoulder at the warm glow beneath a scorched plank of wood. "It's sort of glowing. Maybe it's a Filibuster Firework. Told you it was a prank."

The red-haired witch graced him with an annoyed stare. "Pranks don't destroy whole museums, James."

But James didn't seem to hear her as he muttered to himself, expelling wood and glass in every direction. He pocketed his wand and brushed away the splinters as the glassy object came into view. "Agh!" he groaned in displeasure. "It's just some piece of junk crystal ball. Aaaah, I see boredom in your future . . . ." He picked it up and shook off the dust. "It has something on it, some writing. I can feel some scratches under my fingertips. Runes, perhaps. Waste of glass . . . ."

The witch whipped around from placing some sort of shield on a gilded chamber pot. "Put it down! Put it down now!"

"Okay! Yes, mother." James joked, setting the ball down on the ground. Lily turned back to her protection wards with one last warning look at the wizard. "I'm not going to touch it, honest!"

"You'd better not." She warned. "That there is the Unfathomable Orb. It's rumored that the finders of it could never properly read the inscriptions, but somehow their sixth sense would let them know the Orb was dangerous."

The boys froze, staring at the orb in question. Could that be where Golradir was imprisoned? If so, it was a very shoddy disguise (it looked practically harmless) to keep him locked there for all eternity, Harry snorted.

Lily frowned deeply as she turned to James again, who was tossing the orb back and forth. "I don't see anything wrong with it." He shrugged, staring into the smoky depths and forcibly shaking it. "Doesn't feel weird."

Lily dryly replied, "Obviously, your sixth sense must be defective. I said put it down."

"Oh, come off it, Evans! There's nothing dangerous about this crystal ball. You certainly are on edge tonight. You sure you're not superstitious?" She glared at him and crossed her arms. "Come on, Lily. We'd best make the most of this night; we're going to be here all night as it seems the Aurors are too smashed to make the call."

"James," she scolded, "Quit playing around. Not only do we have a job to do, but that so-called harmless-looking crystal ball is a death trap. You shouldn't be messing ab—what ... are you...? Are you laughing at me, Potter?"

Harry thought James was indeed laughing at her, as his shoulders shook from badly suppressed laughter. "Death trap?" He repeated among chuckles. "Honestly, Lily. What's it going to do: predict that Mad Eye will blow someone else up? Prophecy we're going to have a horrible evening? Oh! Never mind; it already came to paaaass, ooh..."

"Weird people." Harry glanced at the frowning Being behind him, a safe distance from the scene.

"It's not at all dangerous, Lily. If it was, would I be touching it?"

"Yes."

"Exactly! I'd. . . . Wait, hang on." He scratched his head before shrugging. "Trust me. It isn't dangerous. Catch!"

He tossed the ball to the witch, who made a startled noise before cautiously catching it and holding it at arms length. "James! I can't believe you! — what if it broke? Honestly, why do I put up with you?"

"There is nothing wrong with a little fun every now and then, Evans. And see? Naught to worry about." His smug smile morphed into one of light amusement as Lily held the orb far away from her. "Goodness, it isn't a dung bomb, Evans. You're holding it like it's about to crap on you."

Her green eyes glittered in annoyance and James 'oofed' as he cradled the Unfathomable Orb to his chest. "It might as well! Look what you've done, you've gone and activated it! Merlin, James! Just take it to the curator." Harry noticed the orb had indeed come to life, softly glowing amber as the runic carvings steadily increased in intensity.

"Me? You've got to be joking. The man has it in for me already. You," he emphasized, shoving the artifact in her arms, "Take it to Old Tetchy." It only brightened in her grasp, causing the witch to scowl. "Perhaps if he sees a few artifacts salvaged, that stick up his arse'll — "

"James." Chided Lily, scowling as he carelessly shrugged. "You found it, you played with it, be a man, Potter: take it to Mr. Gillpatrick." The passing match continued between the two with their frowns deepening.

"It's just a ball of glass with air; there's nothing to be afraid of, Evans."

"Then why are you adamant I take it to him? Afraid he'll insult you again? You've nothing to worry about: you never had qualms about using that big mouth of yours before."

"I resent that." Harry's father argued with a pout. "Nevertheless, you are the expert on Charms, Miss Evans; if anyone would know how to handle such a death trap, it'd be you." With a suppressed smirk, the rumple-haired man held the Unfathomable Orb out to Lily expectantly. The carvings glittered curiously as the witch glowered at the wizard, snatching the artifact from his grasp. Her frown deepened as a smirk stretched across his face triumphantly.

Lily slowly shook her head, her green eyes narrowed. "I don't know why I expect you to grow up all of a sudden; I can see responsibility is a concept lost on you." She turned on her heel, marching over piles of debris toward the back of the museum. She had seemingly missed the look falter on James' face as she said these words as a pained, conflicted expression now twisted on his features.

Both father and son rolled their eyes in reluctant surrender and exasperation respectively. "Lily, wait." James called after her, marching through the rubble to catch up. He immediately seized the Unfathomable Orb in his hands, tugging it back to him. "I'm sorry. I'll go. It's time for me to take responsibility, right? It's been a terrible night for us both, only made worse by my grievances." She raised an eyebrow. "I'll return this to Tetchy."

Surprisingly, the witch rolled her eyes. "If you call that an apology, James Potter — "

"What? I am sorry." His annoyance was clearly evident.

"Argh! Why do I bother with you? That was the absolute worst non-apology I have ever heard."

"Merlin's balls, Lily! Would you let me do this without being so difficult?"

"I'm not being difficult; I just want a proper apology for your not listening to my warnings — yet again, I might add." At this, James only scoffed. "So please let me take this back to Mr. Gillpatrick before you break it on the way there." She reached for the globe and pulled it back to her, but James hadn't let go.

"Well, thank you for that vote of confidence, but you can trust me to deliver a stupid crystal ball back to its owner, thank you." By his father's voice, Harry could tell he was really irritated.

"That's just it — I can't trust you to return this artifact without tossing it round like a quaffle and accidentally shattering it when your two-second attention span catches sight of something else."

"I really resent that!"



Harry rolled his eyes as they continued to bicker like children, playing a dangerous tug-of-war with the Unfathomable Orb, which seemed to glow brighter in their grip. Their heated squabbling suddenly stopped as James yanked the globe from Lily's hands with a sneer and a triumphant shout of, "Aha! I win, Evans. Let's try to see you take this from me now." He tucked the dimmed Orb under his arm and began to walk away. What, Harry mused, was the Orb aware of who was who? Harry wasn't surprised; it was magic, after all.

Lily's face turned sour and she marched in the opposite direction. "Go on, then! If you happen to break it from lack of proper care, you'd better ready yourself to explain it to him. I'm not taking the fall for your hard head on this one."

That stopped James in his tracks. "I do not have a hard head."

The witch mirthlessly snorted. "If both you and the Unfathomable fell on the way to the curator's, the Orb would crack open faster than your head, and that's saying something."

"Why must you always insist on arguing with me?"

"Because you always insist on doing foolish things! Perhaps if you'd take things more seriously; take initiative, make a constructive decision for once, then I wouldn't have to argue my point across." Her emerald eyes glittered with challenge and another deeper meaning as she stood a distance from the wizard.

James tossed the Orb from one hand to the next, scowling. "Fine then. You want me to take initiative? Make a constructive decision?" Lily's eyes narrowed. "Have it your way. Catch!"

Lily's eyes rounded to the size of saucers as the Unfathomable Orb soared through the air and arced to her position. The invisible runes suddenly blazed to life as it curved gracefully downward and Lily desperately stumbled over rubble to catch it.

As she silently cursed, tripping over a burnt tapestry a sudden gust of wind harshly blew through the museum, briefly picking up bits of debris and suspending the Orb's advance. Lily finally pulled out her wand and aimed...

...Except the glowing Orb crashed at her feet and exploded into thousands of glass fragments.

All occupants — both corporeal and disembodied — of the room gaped, staring wide eyed at the golden smoke issuing from the shattered pieces of glass. James blinked, his eyes large behind his spectacles. "Oh, shi..."

Lily, who had been staring at the smoky shards in horror, finally broke from her stupor and rounded on the wizard. "James!" She gasped in alarm. "I...can't...believe you!"

"Oh, we can fix that, right?"

"You broke it!"

"We're in trouble, aren't we?"

"James!" Lily huffed, kneeling over the upward seeking smoke. "Oh, we'll be in so much trouble! We'll lose our jobs, we'll — "

The red-haired witch abruptly ceased her panicked rant as the yellowish smoke from the Unfathomable Orb entrancingly danced its path over her chin, wrapped like embracing fingers around her neck and slithered through her gaping mouth and nostrils. The assailing smoke puffed innocently from the wreck of glass, the runes' glow ominously dying out as the smoke lifted. Lily's eyes had a glazed quality almost, as her body went stiff and her eyes became unfocused.

"Lily?" James called out tentatively. When she didn't respond, he quickly made it to her side, grabbing her shoulders. "Lily? Green-Eyes, look at me." Still, nothing. Harry could only watch as his father concernedly waved his hands before his mother's face, carding his fingers through her hair and whispering her name over and over. "Lily, Lily, please!"

As soon as the smoke cleared, Lily gave her first response. She swayed slightly in James' embrace, her eyes falling heavily shut. James made a noise of startle before Lily suddenly blinked, bowing her head and clutching her temple.

"Oh, thank goodness!" James hugged her tightly, breathing into her hair. "I thought that dratted crystal ball had done something to you. You never know with these things; could've been smoldered opium or dragon's claw smoke, or enchanted powder — "

"Silence." Her uncharacteristically cold voice hushed. James pulled back in surprise, shock drawn on his features. Even Harry felt a chill run down his spine at his mother's harsh voice.

His father slightly cocked his head to the side, staring at his fiancé. "Lily? What's wrong?" The witch in question gripped her head tighter, seizing handfuls of hair. "Are you feeling all right? D'you feel funny?" Still, she did not answer. "Lily, what...?" James breathed out in frustration. "All right, all right, I know I'm stupid, a toerag, and an idiot to boot. I broke the Unfathomable. But you were right and I'm sorry, I should've listened to you all along."

The red-haired witch flinched away from his voice, her fingers tightening with his every word. "Shut up."

"Right, right." James nodded, rubbing her arms soothingly. "You need to think. You know what, you don't have to tell Curator Tetchy anything. I'll clean up my own mess somehow. Figuratively speaking, of course." He smirked arrogantly as he gestured to the smashed artifact. "Nothing a bit of gold won't solve; Gillpatrick would sell his soul for the right amount. Cut off a finger, slaughter a thousand house elves, sign in blood — "

"Shut up!" Lily's cold grating voice ordered as she fisted her hair. "Keep silent, human!"

"Human'?" The hazel-eyed wizard inquired with a contorted face. "Isn't that a bit much, Lily? I know we're fighting and all but this is ridiculous. And would you look at me? I'd rather not talk to your dead hair, no matter how beautiful and red it is. Are you listening to me, Lily? Look at me!"

"SILENCE!" She glared up at James, making Harry step back in his shock and the Being near him curse most foul.

For Lily Evans' signature green eyes weren't vibrant emerald.

They were blazing, furious yellow.

They were golden.

Harry felt his mouth drop as he studied his young mother, her eyes shining with malice and her youthful face lined with severity and wear.

James' throat clicked several times as he tried to speak, but failed. Though his speechlessness seemed to do the trick. Trails of green bled through the gold in her captivating stare, returning Lily's eyes to their natural color. Her gaze was distracted and her expression still fierce, before she blinked back into awareness and her face finally softened. Confusion lit her features as she glanced around the museum.

"James? What ... what happened?" She sounded genuinely bewildered.

The dark-haired wizard simply stared wide-eyed at his disturbingly normal fiancé. The Gryffindor snapped his mouth shut, staring at his partner with cautious eyes. "Lily ... what was that?"

"What was what?"

Harry balked. James asked, "You don't ... you don't remember? Anything?"

"Any what?"

"Of what just happened now."

"What?" She pressed, her tone annoyed. "Did something happen? Did the Aurors come?" She glanced around the museum before her eyes alighted upon the broken Unfathomable Orb. Curiously, she tilted her head to the side considering it. "It's broken." She needlessly pointed out.

"Yes." He carefully stated, drawing out the one word. "Do you remember what happened when it broke?"

Lily threw him a bemused look. "I dunno ... was I yelling at you?"

"You don't remember?"

She threw her hands in the air, exasperated. "Well, if I did, I wouldn't have phrased it in a question, would I?"

"All right, there's no need for nastiness."

"I'm not being nasty! I just — "

"Aha!" James suddenly shouted, snapping his fingers and grinning in satisfaction. "Of course, that's it."

"What's it?" Harry could only guess his mother was beyond annoyed.

"The Unfathomable. That's why no one could decipher it. Why didn't I think of it before?" He chuckled to himself before catching Lily's befuddled expression. "It was probably filled with dragon's claw smoke, which had to have been pounded into fine powder beforehand and we all know dragon's claw is used in Mood Modification Tonics. It all makes sense: the dizziness, the dilated eyes, your irritability and moodiness — "

"I am not moody!"

" — Combined with your stress and add to the fact this powder is ancient and dragon claw is so difficult to acquire it is considered an illegal substance ... you were drugged, Lily; albeit briefly. That's why you turned on me."

Puzzlement lit her features. "I turned on you?"

"Yes. Because ordinarily, you never would have. And honestly," he smirked gesturing to himself, "who would turn down this? No one, my dear. I'm irresistible; I'm sexy." If that was meant to be a joke, only James himself found the punch line. Kaltag scoffed, shaking his head and Lily frowned.

Furrowing her brow in displeasure Lily shook her head as if to clear it. "Now that you mention it, I do feel a bit faint," she nodded, noticing the remains of the Orb and sighing heavily. "It's broken. I suppose it's no surprise you broke it."

"Yes, I'll tell the curator it's my fault, so long as you're all right. Lily, I — "

"It's ... it's all right." Though she was right in front of them all, it seemed Lily was miles away, lost in her own body, Harry could only guess. Her eyes were somewhat distant, dull; it did not glow as fiercely as it had five minutes ago. But at least they were green, he mentally sighed. "I'm fine. It's just glass, after all."

Luckily, James did not seem convinced. "Just glass? A moment ago you were shoving wands up my bum about being careful with it and now . . . . Are you — ?"

Lily shook her wand free from the closeness of their bodies and waved it over the orb. Nothing happened. She waved once again, more forcefully, but still nothing. Harry narrowed his eyes as the corner of her lip slightly upturned. "It can't be fixed. It's irreparable." A ghost of a smirk could be seen curving her lips.

"Yes, you've said that before. I'll tell the curator it was my — "

"Are you all right?" Spiridon dashed out of nowhere, brow furrowed. "We heard a great crash back there and they thought it best if I came to investigate. Did something happen?"

James waved him off, helping an unsteady Lily to her feet. "We're fine, something just fell."

Spiridon's eyes darted to the uncharacteristically silent witch then to the remains of the Orb. His dark gaze flitted quickly to the wizards, almost suspicious. "It fell, you say?" James only nodded, busily distracting himself with Lily.

"It fell, it fell; for the hundredth time, it fell! Do you feel all right? Nauseous, funny?" He turned his attention back to Lily.

"Why would she feel unwell?" Spiridon accused, staring at Lily carefully. She cautiously stared back, wiping the dust off her robes.

"I feel fine." Her firm tone brooked no room for argument; her face turned serious once more. "And you should not be asking questions, officer or no."

"I was merely concerned for you well-being, Miss Evans. Sickness runs rampant these days. First my wife, then you. I find the

coincidence most peculiar." Spiridon's dark eyes narrowed as he studied the witch closely.

Her expression darkened. "Perhaps then, it is the simple presence of you that causes women to fall ill."

"Lily!" But before she could reply, there was a stirring at the museum entrance, followed by several shouts and calls.

"That will be the Aurors," Lily stated, sniffing and straightening her robes. "It's about time. Our business here is done. James?" With a hesitant smile James bowed to Spiridon in departure before following obediently after his partner.

As James greeted the Aurors and detailed them about their findings, Harry watched as Lily glanced back at the ruined museum, her expression pained as she studied the destroyed pieces of history. Her face did not change until her eyes darted to the sharp ruins of the now lifeless Unfathomable Orb.

Harry's eyes widened as she gazed upward, seemingly staring at him; but he realized she was staring through him and at Spiridon, whose suspicious expression had returned. They warily watched each other for what seemed like an eternity before James broke through their staring match.

"Lily? We're cleared to leave. Let's go home." She nodded at him, motioning for him to lead out of the museum. Harry thought that was the last he would see of his parents before he was sucked back to the Quintessence.

But suddenly Lily glanced back into the museum and in his direction at Spiridon. What melancholy thoughts he had had about his parents and James' explanation of Lily's doubtful stupor flew out the window when he saw her face.

Gone was the sweet, speculating green-eyed inquisitiveness of Lily Evans.

The harsh golden eyes resurfaced, her hard face smirking, mocking Harry even as he felt the rush of wind sweep him out of the memory. He knew it would be impossible to forget those eyes.

Realization hit him with the force of the Hogwarts Express when he realized he was looking into the golden eyes of Golradir.

oooooooooooo

A/N: Read and review! If you do, Part II will be out much quicker than this one, I guarantee! Ha ha... bribery: not just for politicians anymore (rolls eyes).

A/N 2: I am soooooo sorry for the long wait. There's really no excuse, and I'm pleasantly surprised anyone stuck around this long. But it's finally coming to a conclusion two years in the making. Well folks, all I can say is fasten your seatbelts.

This rollercoaster's about to take off.



## Chapter Thirty: The Vanishing Babe, Part II

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"We never predicted the malevolent Bellotaur would escape; that Lily Evans would get pregnant with him," Calchas informed when the boys returned. "Possessed, at the very most ... but not this."

"Pregnant?" Harry wondered aloud.

Kaltag snorted, crossing his arms, muttering something under his breath.

Harry could not wrap his brain around the vision he had just seen. Golradir had possessed his mother? And she was now pregnant with him? His mother's first child was evil? He was suddenly glad he wasn't corporeal; he was liable to throw a fit and destroy the clearing and everyone in it. That couldn't be true, it had to be undoubtedly, absolutely, incontrovertibly —

"False!" Harry shouted with raised arms. He was peeved that no one heard him.

Kaltag opened his mouth several times to say something, but he thought better of it. He finally settled on, "Why was my father there?"

Harry spun to face Kaltagonus with an incredulous look. "Did you not just hear them? They said my mum's first kid was evil! And all you care about is why your dad was there?" Coming to terms with the fact that he'd never be noticed, Harry grumbled to himself and crossed his arms, scowling.

The Council stirred, staring at one another out of the corners of their eyes before Odysseus decided to answer the him. "It was quite a scandal when the goddess Athene married." He chuckled, folding his fingers together. "For one, she was a virgin goddess, and was to remain so for all eternity. Also, against tradition, she chose her husband, not her parents. She was never to be wedded."

"It sent a flood of astonishment throughout both the magical and divine communities." Penelope finished.

The Being scoffed. "Great. So you're blaming him for my miserable existence?" He turned away to seemingly examine the shadows and quietly murmured, "We agree on one thing, at least."

"Even more amazing was the announcement of goddess Athene's pregnancy."

"Well, that's sort of what happens," Kaltag explained slowly, as if he were speaking to a child, "You know, when people get married, there's usually a kid thrown in there somewhere."

"Boy — !"

Kaltag held a hand up to forestall Agamemnon's reprimand. "So she was pregnant: no reason to go mad all of a sudden. And it still doesn't give me a reason as to why he was there, I mean, Lily Evans was right: he could have gone to the apothecaries at the Aristopolis. Hell, he could've pulled valerian root out of his arse for all it's worth." Harry nodded in agreement, putting the revelation about his mother (and the nauseating mental image) out of his mind for a moment.

"Perhaps it is best," Calchas softly replied, "that we do not stray from our path just yet."

In a sickening reel of color and wind, Harry and Kaltag disappeared once more.

ooooo

(The Asklepieion at Epidauros, Mender Diocletian's Conference Room. Tuesday, November 14, 1978. 7:21 PM.)

They arrived in a sparsely furnished room lit by a low torch in the corner. A table off to the side was piled high with scrolls and a makeshift desk sat in front of two squashy chairs. Upon closer inspection Harry could see that some of the scrolls on the table were faintly glowing, while others seemed quite normal. Just as Harry was about to further examine where the Quintessence had sent them now, the darkened doorway steadily grew in brightness and he could hear indistinct conversation.

Someone was coming.

Harry held his breath, waiting to see his parents but was mildly disappointed. A mop of gray hair was illuminated in a golden halo as an older man in long robes carried a torch in one hand and a set of glowing scrolls in the other. Kaltag must have known who he was, because the Being suddenly growled low in his throat.

"Friend of yours?" Harry joked, knowing he wouldn't receive an answer.

Following closely behind him was a beautiful woman in imposing but meticulous robes, her dark eyes dancing in the firelight. Harry's brow rose when he spotted Spiridon right at her heels in full uniform. "Athena," he absently mused, shifting closer to the trio. Kaltagonus stood straighter upon seeing his parents, particularly Athena, and his eyes gleamed with something incomprehensible. A hint of a smile tugged at his lips, and Harry realized this was probably one of the few times he'd ever seen his mother.

The older man — more than likely a Celestial, Harry assumed — erratically gestured for the couple to sit before the writing table as he lit another torch in the room. He carefully set the scrolls down on the desk and pattered around on the shelves behind him. Harry heard the unmistakable clinking of glass.

"Mender, if you would?" Athena prompted, hiding a smile at the man's absentmindedness.

"Hm? Oh," The elder Celestial stood straight, an apologetic expression etched in his features as he tipped his head and sat behind his desk. "My apologies, my apologies, your highness. I shall not linger."

"See to it that you do not Diocletian," Athena lightly warned, resting a hand on her flat stomach. "It is not even two months and already I have sickness of the stomach and importunate cravings."

Diocletian arched a brow. "Yes?" He drawled inquisitively. "Right now?"

Athena gracefully nodded. "Peacock eggs," she enlightened. Harry noticed Spiridon's pallor immediately faded. "With lamb, vinegar,

honey, grapes," she paused, her brow furrowing in thought. "And black broth."

Kaltagonus laughed aloud as the General instantly turned a sickly green. "Spartan ... black broth?" He haltingly inquired. She pensively nodded. Spiridon turned even greener than thought possible. Diocletian's eyes twinkled in amusement. "Right. Please ... excuse me for a-a moment." Spiridon tightly smiled and crossed the room with poise. The minute he stepped over the threshold, he took off at a dead run down the corridor. The boys laughed quietly, as did Diocletian.

"Oh, dear," Athena worryingly sat straight in her seat staring after her husband. "That's the third time today."

Diocletian nodded affirmatively and stood from his chair, moving back to his shelved bottles. He held one up in the torchlight and examined it with narrowed eyes as he spoke. "Yes, yes, it is normal," he clunked a pot of clear, lightly smoking gel back on the ledge. "It comes especially early in a pregnancy begetting a very powerful child or," he furtively glanced out of the corner of his eye, "a pregnancy of multiples."

Athena's eyebrows were nearly at her hairline. "Multiples, Mender?" She inquired falteringly. "Are. . . . As in...?"

"More than one, yes," he answered in amusement, raising another jar to the light and setting it aside. He held a clear green glass up and exclaimed his approval, taking a metal goblet from a far shelf and setting both on his desk. He gave the Entity of Wisdom a pointed look. "In your case, it is both. Though with the interference of force and energy, I cannot tell how many you will birth."

She nodded distractedly, placing another hand atop her abdomen. "I had a suspicion it was more than one," she mumbled and stared thoughtfully at nothing. "The heaven-signs were far too alarming to be a single child." Diocletian merely studied her intently.

It was then Spiridon stumbled back into the room, still pale, dabbing the corners of his mouth with a silk cloth. The green tinge had faded from his cheeks to an unusual white, making his dark features stand out in the dim room. He visibly swallowed, leveling his stance and muttering his apologies before sinking jadedly in his seat. Diocletian

smiled grimly and sat at his desk, raising the green jar and pouring a generous amount in the goblet. He pushed it toward a wan Spiridon.

"An anti-emetic," he explained as Spiridon distrustfully took the cup. "To stop your morning sickness."

"Morning sickness?" Kaltag questioned, his brow wrinkled in thought. Harry wondered about that as well. If memory served him right, pregnant women had bouts of morning sickness, not men: unless this was some weird custom among Celestials.

"Mender," Spiridon began gruffly as he heavily set the goblet down with a loud 'thunk'. "This—this morning sickness, is ... is it — "

"It is normal, yes," Diocletian finished, his eyes already brimming with knowledge as he laced his fingers together under his chin. "Especially in bonds between strongly like-minded Celestials or those bearing a Celestial child. Both husband and wife experience the conventional matters of gestation: morning sickness, curious appetites, things of the like," Diocletian steepled his fingertips contemplatively. "It not only brings the bonded closer, but it proves the potency, the sincerity, of the powerfully-matched marriage."

Kaltag chuckled as Spiridon paled even more. "Does ... does it end?" He queried. Harry snickered at the hint of desperation in his tone.

The Mender smiled genially. "It depends on the divine strength of the child: a stronger child makes for a quicker mimicry, and rest assured, your children are indeed strong."

Spiridon blinked, casting a fleeting glance toward his wife. Athena flashed him a small grin in return. The General held the Mender in his gaze. "Children?"

"Yes. They are due no later than mid-August, and though I cannot tell the exact number until the birth itself, from your readings," he paused to sift through several rolls of papyrus pulling out a brightly lit one, "ah, yes. Your diagnosis shows a slightly more than liberal amount of force-energy commotion. Fortunately, you've naught to concern yourself over, your highness; your examination was normal." He briefly paused, shiftily meeting Spiridon's eyes before continuing. "There is nothing out of place, nothing that should cause

distress, and at this point I estimated from the cycles of energy you — "

"Please, Diocletian," Athena hastily interrupted with a raised hand. "As trite as this may sound," she fleetingly glanced at Spiridon before continuing, "I would ... much rather be caught ... unawares."

Spiridon's neck whipped around so fast Harry was surprised it hadn't snapped. "You don't want to know the Mender's estimation?"

The Entity shook her head with a smile. "I believe staying in a constant state of wonder adds a bit more excitement for the impending unknown, especially when it involves our children." She placed her gentle hand atop Spiridon's rough one. "Do you not agree?"

The dark-haired Being stared at his wife long and hard, before turning to the meditative Mender. Somewhat hesitantly, Spiridon nodded a time after. "Yes," he quietly agreed, brushing his palm over Athena's white knuckles. "Yes, I think it would be best for you not to know." Diocletian's eyes glittered with something unreadable at his words, but he didn't say anything. "My lady wife, the time is far spent. Is there not a gathering of the Cabinet you must conduct?"

"Oh, yes," Athena replied hastily as she stood. "I must meet with my father."

"And I must monitor the Battalion. I left it under Captain Diomedes' command." Spiridon turned olive with that admission earning a laugh from the Entity.

"Goodness, you must run to make sure he has not destroyed centuries' worth hard work and discipline." She teased, standing up. "Diocletian, thank you for your services."

Diocletian stood to his feet and bowed his head, clasping Athena's extended hands. "It was my honor, your highness. May Mother Hera bless your pregnancy."

With a grateful smile, Athena exited the room with Spiridon. Harry felt a slight niggling feeling urging him to follow them. He noticed Kaltagonus moved out into the corridor and away from the office as the same as he did.

In the hall, Spiridon turned to two young, commonly clothed women and motioned them away. With dual curtseys, they paced down the passage and into the shadows. There was a pleasant silence between the couple where they exchanged delighted smiles. Spiridon started off as he grabbed her hands. "So ... children, eh?"

Athena chuckled with a nod and stared down at their joined hands anxiously. "Children. It is overwhelming."

"Indeed." He agreed.

"Are you offended that I would like to wait?"

"Not at all, my lady warrior," Kaltag gagged at the endearment. "I told you: I will follow your judgment. I trust you."

Athena slowly nodded, her excited smile turning hesitant. "Spiridon, I must confess something." The Being raised an eyebrow, prompting her to continue. "Though I told Diocletian I did not want to know how many, I ... I have this strange feeling."

Spiridon's eyes narrowed. "What is this strange feeling? Is it the children, is — "

"In way, yes," the Entity nodded, staring at the floor. Slowly, she raised her gaze to meet her husband's. "For some peculiar reason, I had this odd feeling when Diocletian was telling us about the children. Something did not seem quite right; there seemed to be something hidden in his words; but no matter. I am making an exaggeration of nothing." Her smile wavered as she looked away again. "But though he did not confirm it, for some strange reason I believe that I ... that I might be having..."

Harry and Kaltag leaned forward. Spiridon squeezed her hands as her expression turned troubled. "Might be having what, Athene?"

Her dark eyes gleamed mysteriously in the torchlight. "I think I am carrying twins." She offered him a small smile. Spiridon chuckled in relief.

Twins? Harry's brow furrowed. The Smythes were triplets. She couldn't have had twins; surely there was another one hiding in there.

"Ah, is that all?" Spiridon laughed in relief, pressing a kiss to the woman's forehead. "You frighten me with such tones, my wife. How do you know you are having twins?"

Athena frowned. "It is a feeling. It might be the children's power, but I had a dream several nights before: of Sister Artemis and Brother Apollo, together."

Spiridon agreed with a nod. "Twins."

"Yes, but ... they were distressed and..." Athena shook her head. "...I sense something looms over the horizon, something that troubles me. My feeling of elation is diminished only by my anxiety."

Spiridon embraced her closer. "For what? Athene, if you feel something...?"

After a pause, Athena shook her head and tried to smile convincingly, though her dark eyes conveyed worry. "Let this not cloud our spirits." She caressed the front of his breastplate, avoiding his eyes. "All we should worry ourselves about is what their names will be."

Spiridon seemed to think for a moment, but returned her smile and kissed her sweetly. Again, Kaltagonus gagged, rolling his eyes. "As you wish, my love. As soon as you return from your conference, we shall think of names for pairs. Be mindful of the children and take care of yourself, and please do not argue with your kinsman Ares. . . . " Kaltagonus looked distinctly ruffled by their surety.

The two talked for a few more moments before Athena parted with a kiss, followed by the other women — Harry guessed servants — down the corridor. The Beings and wizard watched her form disappear into the darkness quietly.

As soon as Athena was out of sight, Harry noticed Spiridon's expression turn serious. He stalked in the opposite direction; Harry wondered if he was going to revisit the Mender. His musings proved



right as the boys trailed the General into the room and watched him round on the Mender.

"A word, Diocletian." he briskly began, drawing to his full height. He no longer looked like the sick Being that had nearly tossed his dinner on his wife's lap. The Mender, who was puttering around with his potions and scrolls, swung around at the disruption, nearly dropping his handful of pots in alarm. The elder Being clutched the front of his robes with his hand and let out a sharp breath.

"General! You frightened me." The Mender looked distinctly uneasy of Spiridon, but for the life of him, Harry couldn't imagine why.

"I'm fully aware," Spiridon wearily replied, crossing his arms. His demeanor changed, and he suddenly looked much colder than Harry had ever seen him.

"There's the bastard we all know and love." Kaltag bitterly proclaimed, crossing his arms with a scowl. Rolling his eyes, Harry turned back to the scene unfolding.

"You need something." It wasn't a question, but a statement. "Six hundred years since I have been in the service and never once have you stalled on a request."

Spiridon turned his head but did not look at Diocletian, smirking and staring at the ground as he walked forward. "And I do not stall now. I am no fool to neglect the momentary look you gave me to spark my suspicion and though my wife believes she is reacting excessively, I am persuaded that your diagnosis was not wholly honest." As Diocletian sputtered in protest, Spiridon resumed and spoke very fast. "I respect my wife in every way and I would never consult you without so much as a by your leave, Diocletian, however: my concern far outweighs my loyalty as of this moment."

Kaltag scoffed. "With all that hot air you exhale it's amazing you haven't taken a breath."

Diocletian looked alarmed. "You would go behind Pallas Athene's back?"

"To get what I want, yes." Spiridon shortly replied.

The Mender grasped a fistful of his gray hair. His wide eyes searched wildly his shelves, as if looking for something very strong to drink among the remedies. "You are mad."

"Rather than call you in for suspicion of treachery, I will tell you this only because you are competent enough to solve the problem: a feeling vexes my lady wife, one concerning our children, I believe. I trust her judgment and though she bids me confidence, I would rather feel better if I could allay her apprehension, so I ask your full discretion."

Diocletian hastily nodded, sifting nervously through his scrolls. "Yes?"

"What are you keeping from her? Is there something that warrants my wife's anxiety?"

The Mender's eyes suddenly glimmered in the torchlight, not entirely becoming. His expression morphed from anxious trepidation to snide amusement in a split second and he, too, drew to his full height.

"Possessive, are we? My wife? Millennia ago his majesty would have shackled anyone who sought his favored child to Mount Ida and have the beasts of the forest feast on his flesh like foolish Prometheus. You would be so bold as to claim the Patron of Athens as yours? A possession?"

"Do not make me linger, Diocletian." Spiridon's light tone was threatening. "You know I hate to fritter when action can be taken ... Colonel." Diocletian suddenly deflated and he appeared meek once more. Satisfied, Spiridon stepped closer to the desk, trailing a finger over the surface. It seemed he caught dust, and with disgust, he wiped his hand on one of the chairs, earning a glare from the Mender.

"Athene thinks she carries twins and her judgment is unusually sharp. Is there any reason to suspect otherwise?" Spiridon continued. "Is there?"

After a pause, Diocletian averted his gaze and fumbled with his papyrus scrolls. "That information is strictly between my patient and I."

Spiridon's eyes hardened; Harry was taken aback. "I stand proxy for the patient. You would do well to remember it is my seed she will bring to term. That gives me paternal right in her stead."

Diocletian rattled his bottles, his eyes looking crazed in the firelight. "Y-you hold no power over me."

The dark-haired Being curved an eyebrow, slowly stalking around the desk and backing the Mender into the shelves. Diocletian drew back slightly, only to topple a few of his remedies, flinching as the glass shattered on the ground. "Not as General, no," Harry had to lean in close to hear Spiridon's menacing words. "No, Colonel, but as husband to the goddess of war and intellect — Zeus' favorite child, mind you — I do have authority over you regardless. Now: tell me what you could not tell my wife. Why does the notion of having twin children upset her?"

Diocletian witheringly sighed and composed himself, quietly rasping, "I never said that."

Spiridon's eyes glittered. "So it is true." He thoughtfully withdrew from Diocletian's personal space, ignoring the man's quiet sigh of relief.

"There is much force and energy interference, and it is awfully early in the pregnancy that — "

"You cannot be certain," Spiridon derisively repeated. "I understand, but — loathe as I am to admit it — you are no fool, Diocletian; else I would have put you out of my ranks posthaste." The Mender flushed. "You had to have made the approximations somehow."

With a furrowed brow, the elder Celestial moved toward his writing table littered with empty bottles and a pile of rolled scrolls. He hastily opened one after the other and worked quicker at Spiridon's impatient exhales. "Ah, yes!" He raised a particularly long and glowing papyrus scroll into view and chuckled triumphantly. "My first estimations were between two and five multiples, as in accordance with the standard suppositions."

"Yes?" The General edgily pressed as Diocletian died off, studying the diagnostic scroll more carefully.

"However, based on medical analyses from several tests, including chemical content, essence capacity, volume, arithmetical compositions, blood cycles — "

"Get on with it."

"I estimated it at two, a powerful pair," the Mender hurriedly answered, letting out a pleased breath at Spiridon's satisfied nod. "However..." the General's brow knitted in question. "Great power comes not without great concern."

Spiridon's eyes darkened. "Colonel..."

"Two children are likely to be present in your wife's womb; alas, there is a bothersome force of energy at work as well." Diocletian lowered his voice as the conversation turned serious. Spiridon bowed forward as the Mender beckoned him closer. "Your wife is carrying a runt fetus." Harry's gaze fell on Kaltag when the Being fidgeted uncomfortably. He had a niggling feeling none of them were going to like this.

"Will this ... affect her pregnancy in any way?"

Diocletian shook his head. "It is not an issue, but I did not want the Entity of war's wrath on my head if and when the child dies." Kaltagonus made a sort of strangled noise at his words.

"And there is nothing you can do?"

"I am sorry. Either the child will not survive the pregnancy to full term, or if by some miracle it does, it will not last through the birth. All you can hope for is that the fetus is resigned to its fate: surrendering to the Ferryman, and gets absorbed back into the probable set of twins." Diocletian paused, running a slightly withered hand through his grayish hair. "And were the runt to extraordinarily survive the delivery, it would only wish for a quick death afterwards. A child wrought in such conditions would be condemned to bad fortune for the rest of its life." Spiridon frowned, falling silent.

As the torchlight danced along the stone walls of the room, Harry frowned at the younger Being's troubled expression. If he was

indeed the 'runt' as the Mender so callously referred to him as, how did he survive?

Before Harry could dwell on it more, the rush of wind returned and the darkness swirled into a multihued world once more.

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"Why are you showing me this?" Kaltag accused as the Quintessence swirled into view.

Calchas leaned back in his chair, studying the young Being. "You needed to see."

"See what? My kidnapper nearly crapping his chiton and my dad being a git?" Kaltag inquired, his tone disbelieving. "Trust me, I've had experience with the latter first hand."

"Boy, you — !"

"Don't start, Sunshine." Kaltag forestalled, pinching the bridge of his nose in thought. Harry snorted, but sighed. It really was quite frustrating being invisible; it was only enjoyable when it worked to his advantage. "So, Diocletian anticipated this—this — "

"Runt fetus."

Kaltag glared at Agamemnon and unappreciatively replied, "Thank you." With a disgusted sigh, he corrected, "The unexpected fetus — "

"Would perish, yes." Hector completed, folding his hands together.

Kaltag frowned. "But from what I've been taught, it's practically impossible to tell how many Celestial children are in one womb at a time, especially when the parent or child is exceptionally powerful even by Celestial standards."

"Indeed," Odysseus inclined his head.

The Being scoffed, shaking his head. "But he was obviously wrong, I mean," he released a brittle sort of laugh. "I've read spontaneous conception and creation can occur in a pregnancy of multiples if the

environment is sound ... but it is less than rare." Kaltag sulked again; Harry could almost see his mind working behind his eyes. "More often than that, the additional essence force from the other children's energy output can create another child. You know that."

Calchas pursed his lips. "Quite. Nevertheless, the third child — "

With a defeated sigh, Kaltag raised his hands in surrender. "Wait, I don't ... I don't get what you want me to understand about this. It has nothing to do with Golradir, which means you're wasting my time altogether." He tartly finished.

Odysseus smirked. "Ah, that is where you are wrong, clever one. You are reading entirely too deeply into the memory."

Harry narrowed his eyes as Kaltag questioned, "What are — "

Calchas interjected, "This next memory will help you piece together the mystery."

"Oh, no ... not again!" Harry moaned as the roar of sound and whirl of color enveloped them.

ooooo

(The Ancestral Cottage of Charlus Potter. Wednesday, November 29, 1978. 6:19 PM.)

When next Harry opened his eyes, his heart lightened as he found himself staring at his parents again. They were in what looked to be a dark sitting room, with Lily staring at a curled parchment in her hand and James sitting beside her on the couch. They both wore expressions of mild shock on their faces, as if the news they had received was rather stale. Both witch and wizard looked the same, though Harry thought James looked rather greener than normal. And, he mentally sighed, she looked perfectly fine.

"Merlin ... I'm pregnant. Actually pregnant." Lily sighed, clutching handfuls of her auburn locks. "How could I be pregnant?"

Harry blinked. Pregnant? But ... wasn't it 1978? He wasn't an anatomist, but he knew it did not take two years for babies to gestate.

Rather suddenly he realized he could not have been conceived at that time: it was ... it was his brother or sister (or Golradir, he inwardly mused) they were talking about. But Calchas couldn't have been correct, right? It was all just some trick like Kaltagonus said, right? Harry didn't find his thoughts compelling as his heart ached in disapproval. Solemnly, he turned back to his parents.

"Well," James cleared his throat and winced, briefly turning a darker shade of green before smiling. "When two people of opposite sex come together — "

"Do shut up, James!" Lily hissed, elbowing him sharply. It did nothing to curb his poor complexion. "I blame you!"

"I should hope so." James replied rather saucily. He turned to the tea service in front of them and tapped the platter with his wand. Immediately the service sprung to life, the black kettle pouring the hot water and the cubes of sugar all but launching themselves into the tea-bagged pair of cups. Harry vaguely heard his father mutter about needing house elves before he offered the melancholy witch a cup.

Lily grabbed the offered tea, taking a short sip before curtly accusing, "You and your insatiable appetite for sex!" Harry choked; James actually looked abashed behind his teacup. Unimpeded, Lily waved the parchment in front of his face. "Because of you and your—your ... wiles I'm four weeks along!" She took a large gulp and firmly set the cup on the table, the rattling china mirroring her emotions. With a distressed sigh, Lily buried her head in her hands, letting the parchment fall to the wooden floor and roll itself back together.

Frowning deeply, James set his cup aside and reached to comfort her, but hesitated, bringing his hands to his lap. They lapsed into a tense silence, James alternating between fumbling with the hem of his jumper and watching the rising smoke from the cups and Lily hunched in the same position as before.

"Is this it?" Harry nearly jumped out of skin when he heard the Being's voice behind him. Kaltag stood with his arms folded and his face contorted in annoyance. "Calchas, this had better be worth it." Harry stared at him a moment longer and turned back to his parents to find James picking up the parchment and unfurling it.

The dark-haired wizard opened his mouth several times before he sighed. "Sorry." He winced. "I ... well, I'm not, really. I ... it's still our child and I'm definitely not sorry about that." Lily stirred, silently flipping a curtain of hair back to cradle her cheeks in her hands. James' fingers traced whatever was on the parchment and he sighed again. "And I know it wasn't planned..."

Lily scoffed, shaking her head. "Who plans for children at eighteen?"

"My parents did." James pitched in, realizing his mistake at the last moment. "But, those were different times, then." Lily scowled, rubbing her temples. "But the point is, I love you, Lily. And I love this child though it's only been four weeks and it's roughly the size of a Bertie Bott's Bean. This child changes nothing."

"Ha," the Being derisively laughed. "You have no idea how wrong you are."

James tentatively rubbed Lily's shoulders, pulling her into a loose embrace. "I still want to marry you."

Lily snorted. "Even if I waddle down the aisle?" They shared a brief chuckle as James squeezed her shoulders.

"Even if, Green-Eyes." They smiled at each other before Lily's face fell serious and she looked away.

"My family's going to go mental, they will. I don't know what I'll tell them. I can't tell them you've done this to me."

"Yes, because we want them to think their daughter has absolutely no clue who the father of her child is." James cynically replied.

"No, no. They're already not thrilled with you. They think you've tainted their me, their innocent daughter; they went off on us when I said we were living together, remember?"

James frowned, his face greening even more. "Oh, yes." He replied unpleasantly, sipping his tea. "I remember, all right. I still have the finger marks from where your father throttled me." Harry snickered at his father's discomfort.



"They're traditional Muggles," Lily defended, "They expect better from me. And, this is the only time I'll ever admit this, you were right. They do sort of see me in a better light than my sister."

James snickered. "Anyone looks better in light than her. I tell you, the night creatures would deem her a goddess in pitch darkness: they'd never have to see her face." Harry snorted: how right he was. . . .

Lily swung around to deliver a stinging slap to his arm. "James! Though she's a right old bag, she's still my sister." The witch glared at him for all she was worth, crossing her arms and scowling at the tea service on the table.

Hissing and rubbing the sore spot, James shrugged. "Sorry." He looked anything but apologetic.

"At least they haven't a clue as to what we were up to at Hogwarts..." She trailed off, looking decidedly red in the face.

"Oh, no." James agreed with a lascivious chuckle. "They would have me hanged for sure." Lily pulled a cup of tea into her grasp and stared at the liquid in contemplative silence. James seemed to understand what that signaled since he removed the cup from her clutch and held her hands. "Evans ... Lily, we can do this. For better or worse."

Lily wryly replied, "We've not got to that part yet."

But James pouted and held her chin gently between his thumb and forefinger. "In sickness and in health ... "

"Oh, stop."

"To love, to honor, to cherish ... " His tone turned pompous.

Kaltag rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Murder me." He implored, deadpanned.

"And to obey."

"And to — " James' olive face fell into confusion. "I don't remember there being anything about obedience."

Lily faintly smiled. "That's where the Memory Charm comes in handy. After it's said, the bride erases the groom's memory of having said it; but the Ministry'll have the words on record. Can't have you men breaking that hold we've got on you."

James mockingly sneered. "Funny." As he took a sip of tea, he winced, gently rubbing his stomach with one hand and patting Lily's knee. "Yes, well, whether I obey or not, my verdict is still the same: you and the baby are my first priority."

"We've only been out of school a year."

"So? I seem to remember not long ago, girls were birthing infants when they were barely fourteen."

Lily gave him a dark look as she squeezed the bridge of her nose. "Besides that, we've just started our jobs."

The hazel-eyed wizard scoffed as he tapped his wand to stop the teapot from refilling his cup. "Then we'll quit. I've already made it clear — "

"No," Lily abruptly cut him off. "I already told you we're not relying on your inheritance for everything. God knows you'll become even more spoiled and I shudder to think of what you'd teach him."

James blinked, his confusion evident. Harry noticed Kaltagonus stood straighter at the loose announcement. "Who?"

Lily appeared strangely puzzled. "What?"

"You said 'him'," James slowly explained. "Who's 'him'?"

With furrowed brows, Lily stared at the half-full cups of tea on the service for a few moments. Pursing her lips she slowly shook her head. "I dunno who you're talking about. Are you sure you heard me right?"

"Yes," James insisted. "You were talking about me being spoiled — which I am not by the way — and you mentioned 'him'. For all I know, you could be talking about the baby." He laughed, gently thumping

Lily on the knee. "But that's impossible, right? You can't know the gender, it's only been four weeks."

Harry was quite startled when he noticed his mother's gaze turned somewhat frosty. Her eyes focused a little too sharply and he swore they flashed dangerously. But it could have been a trick of the light. . . .

Somewhat too enthusiastically, Lily nodded and cracked a smile. "Right. It's — it's impossible. You'd have to be far-sighted to know such things. Our child could be anything." Her grin was slightly predatory, but if James thought this was suspicious he wasn't letting on.

"You know what? I think you want it to be a boy," James slyly replied, wagging his brows. Lily's eyes flashed again, but rather than turning hard, they softened with relief. With a nervous laugh, Lily raised her arms in surrender.

"Caught me." She huskily whispered. There was something about the way his mother responded that made Harry's spine tingle.

"Don't worry," James replied, leaning close to peck her gently on the cheek. He apparently missed her slight flinch. "I promise not to tell ... if you promise not to let anyone know about ... you know," he gestured to his stomach and shrugged. "I could've sworn I was fine before. Are you sure you didn't hex me with a Mimic Jinx? This morning sickness makes no sense."

"Still nauseous? I've read about the sympathetic pangs of fathers-to-be. Fascinating, really."

James snorted, muttering to under breath before, "Read anything about food cravings? I thought they were supposed to come later — and not with me."

Lily's brow knit in puzzlement. "Cravings? No, I haven't read about that. Surprisingly, I've had a few, but I've got to look into it."

"Well, if you're going to research, be quick about it. I don't want anyone to know about my strange craving for ... pickles."

The red-haired witch's eyebrow arched. "Pickles?"

James nodded. "Yes. Dipped in apricot marmalade and ... sour cream." He made a disgusted face.

"Sounds like something I'd eat now."

"Yes, well, at this stage, you're bound to eat the dragonhide off this sofa. . . ."

Throughout all of this, Harry froze. One phrase was stuck on repeat in his mind: Morning sickness? Well, that explained James' sickly pallor. But ... if he was throwing up like Spiridon, that meant ... that meant. . . .

"He's sick? He's got morning ills, like dad...?" Kaltagonus seemed to have caught on to the same train of thought. "But then that means ... " he whispered in breathless shock. Harry's brow flew under his fringe.

"No..." Harry fruitlessly countered as he stared at his parents. That meant ... Calchas was right. That meant —

"Golradir is real," Kaltag answered just as shocked. "And he's taken residence in Lily Potter's womb."

"And he's controlling her," Harry silently added. Both boys stared at the unsuspecting couple in astonishment.

And just as James covered his mouth and scurried out of the room, the whipping winds blustered about, whisking the memory deep into the darkness.

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"It was soon after Athene's husband and Lily Evans would meet at an Order gathering," Penelope began when the boys returned, not giving Kaltagonus a chance to question the last memory. "He offered the services of the Battalion ... and the support of his wife, Athene, the goddess of war."

"But Zeus — "

"Was not pleased, no," Hector continued with a nod. "He chose to remain impartial once more, as he did in the Greek and Trojan wars. Athene, however, chose her side, and unwaveringly supported the Light."

"Not because she believed it to be the appropriate choice," Harry swung his head to catch Achilles' vague expression.

"But because she found a mutual friend." Andromache finished with a small grin.

"What's he doing here?" Harry recoiled at the echoing voice of his mother resounded in his head. He glanced around, but noticed the Quintessence was still there, watching the Being intently; so they weren't in another memory exactly. "Why's he here?" Harry could practically feel the annoyance rolling off of Lily in waves.

"Easy, Green-Eyes," James' soothing tone eased. "He's on our side."

"Though our worlds are currently at odds, I give you the full backing of the Axial Battalion; you have my shield and sword," Harry started as he heard a new voice echo in his head. "And the Entity of War and Wisdom offers her support, as well." Spiridon's deep voice rumbled in his head. He cast a fleeting glance at Kaltagonus and noticed the boy also looked slightly disturbed by the reverberation as well.

"Spiridon Smythe gave his support, despite Zeus' disinclination to enter into agreement with the wizards." Calchas informed. Harry found it quite difficult to pay attention as Spiridon's declaration continued to ring in his head, followed by several stunned exclamations, probably from Order members. He rubbed his scar as his head throbbed once more.

Kaltagonus' brow furrowed. "But ... I thought he was ecstatic to keep the peace between the worlds. History states he was shattered to cease it."

"Celestial tales are weaved from awestruck wizards' hearsay, those who fill in the voids of broken stories with the poetic rubbish everyone wants to hear," Odysseus shook his head with a contemptuous grin. "Zeus' advisors exploited that to their benefit and

thought it best to uphold the treaty between the worlds; the High Being, however, still had reservations about trusting humans and wizards alike."

The Being snorted. "But he certainly doesn't have reservations about taking their wives to bed." This elicited a snicker from Achilles.

" ... Though I cannot be of much assistance," Athena's firm, but pleased voice now sounded in his mind, "I am with child, and will protect them first and foremost. I give my husband consent to stand in my physical place during conflict."

"Great Merlin!"

"Do you believe that?"

"How wonderful!"

"I don't believe it."

"Tha's fantastic, tha' is!" Hagrid's voice boomed.

"She's knocked up already?" Came the hushed voice of James.

"Congratulations!"

"Our Lily is also pregnant!" A matronly voice chimed.

"Lovely! Evans has got herself a playmate..." Harry heard young Sirius' amused murmur.

"We accept your proposal, General," Came Dumbledore's wizened voice. "And receive you and her royal highness Athene, the Entity of War and Wisdom into our humble association. Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix."

The mutterings of the Order died out completely, and Harry was relieved. He was starting to get a headache from all the voices in his head (and before his eyes).

"So they joined the Order." Kaltag quietly summarized.

Hector nodded. "And vowed to fight the forces of Darkness alongside each other," he cryptically informed, his eyes hooded. "Given the circumstances, the women could not do much, so they bonded over their pregnancies."

"Lily Evans had found a friend," Andromache gently stated. "And the witch and Entity became quite close, a firm connection wrought in their shared experiences."

"But before politics could sever the association entirely, tragedy made its rifts known."

Kaltagonus' brow furrowed. "Tragedy? What happened?"

Odysseus' eyes glittered with something unreadable. It unnerved Harry to no end; even Kaltag shifted uncomfortably under the droll man's heavy gaze. "The essence of character ... shifts."

"Wha — "

"It is rumored that Mother Hera herself has forced the essence of many a fetus from what she deemed an ... unworthy soul."

"Are you saying that Hera — "

"Essence shifts are rare, but not unheard of," Kaltagonus growled at the Ithacan for interrupting him yet again. "But one cannot control the ever-shifting tides of power, especially in the face of a jealous spouse or a," he paused for effect, "firm conviction in one's beliefs."

"Voldemort," Harry muttered.

Kaltag impatiently huffed and crossed his arms. "Are you going to make a point?"

Agamemnon snarled and slammed his fist impetuously. "Voldemort, boy! Voldemort! You are more foolish than I had ever imagined!"

"Told you." Harry smugly replied before realizing the inevitable: he was still invisible.

"What about him?" Kaltag crossly inquired. "I thought he was after Harry — who I've told you all along is the one you're looking for!"

"Stupid git." The wizard grumbled.

"The Dark Lord Voldemort did not come for Lily Evans, that night."

"What night?"

"He came after you."

Kaltag groaned audibly and pulled at his red tufts of hair. "Potter, you mean: Harry Potter? Why would he come after me, I've got nothing to do with the world of wizardry!"

"You were an obstacle in his sure victory." Achilles spoke after a while.

"Harry, you mean." Kaltag insistently replied.

"Golradir, calm yourself — "

"I don't understand," Kaltag raised his voice, "what Harry or his mum or Voldemort or any of this has to do with me! You keep talking as if I'm supposed to know and understand all of this and for God's sake, I can't get a word in edgewise while you're talking in bloody circles! Why don't you bloody TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO SAY ALREADY?"

His outburst was followed by silence in which the Quintessence seemed unmoved. Their intense stares bordered with despondency and Harry suddenly felt his chest tighten in anticipation.

Calchas finally raised his chin in acknowledgement of having heard the Being's demand. "Lily Potter's womb once held two children," Calchas gravely revealed. "The warrior of the wizard world ... and you, his brother of terrible past and power."

It was like someone had struck him in the stomach with a beater's bat. The air was stolen from his lungs and Harry was sure his knees would give way and he would swoon like some horror-struck woman. Kaltagonus ... Kaltagonus was. . . .

It was too difficult to say or even think, his mind was clouded over in the sweet fog of denial and the lump in his throat may very well have



been his heart. Harry chanced a glance at the red-haired Celestial; he didn't look any better.

If Harry's world was teetering precariously over the edge now, Penelope's next words certainly gave it the shove it needed to be tipped over into the abyss.

"More than earth was disrupted on the day Golradir infused you with life, Kaltagonus," she impersonally began. "On February 14th, 1979."

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(The Three Broomsticks Tavern. Wednesday, February 14, 1979. 8:01 PM.)

"Where's Peter?" Were the first words Harry heard when the world materialized before his eyes. The rest of the sound was turned up full blast when thunderous chatter erupted all around him. Glasses clinked, drunken men laughed loudly, the place was packed tightly with once-sober bodies and music could be heard from near the front of the bar. There was no mistaking it.

He was at the Three Broomsticks.

The smell of warm butterbeer was a comfort to his ashen form after hearing the Quintessence's latest news. His green eyes sought out the Being beside him, who was looking rather pale himself. Ignoring the pang in his chest, he smiled as he spotted his father with his friends at a worn table near the stairs.

Lupin and Sirius looked every bit as young as James did, their young faces bright and expressions careless. He felt bitter about what would take place in the next few years. For now, Harry ignored the nagging feelings and focused on the young Marauders.

"Where's Peter?" Lupin repeated, craning his neck over the jam-packed tavern.

"He'd better bloody get here before Hagrid comes along and drinks the entire pub dry." Sirius dryly commented.

Lupin snorted behind his mug. "Hagrid? I think you could give him a run for his money now, Padfoot." Sirius made a noncommittal noise and slugged a mouthful of drink.

"Pete? Oh, you know him," James absently traced the rim of his ale mug. "Always called away for something. Told me he's making a killing off that new job of his."

"You don't know the half of it." Harry wryly muttered.

Sirius chuckled deeply, swilling his frothy drink. His eyes had a wooly quality and his smile was very relaxed; clearly, he'd had a few drinks. "Pshaw! Wrong!" He waved off the younger Remus in a dismissing gesture. "You know Pete: he probably shat himself when he heard we're dining with royalty." The latter he said in a supercilious tone as he smoothed his lapel and stuck his nose in the air. James rowdily guffawed, nearly toppling his drink.

"I think you've had enough to drink, Sirius." Harry whirled around at the sound of his mother's stern voice. He hadn't noticed she was there.

"Mum?" Kaltagonus questioned. Harry blinked, eyeing the Being before sighing in relief. Lily was with Athena, who politely smiled at the wizard's antics. He had never been so happy to see the Entity in his life.

"Oh, poppycock," Sirius snootily replied, waving her off. Lily tried to unsuccessfully stifle her giggle; Sirius didn't notice. "It's a time of love! It's Love Day! We must be true to the spirit of Saint Valentine and eat, drink, be merry, and drink! Besides, I'm making sure I don't get smashed: there's a huge party at Diagon Alley and there's a barrel of Tom's ale that's got my name on it. I'm just getting started." He raised his glass and knocked it against a half-hearted Lupin's and a tired James', downing the rest of his drink in one go. "Shall I order another round from Rosmerta?"

"Absolutely not," Lily firmly demanded, pulling the mug from James' willing grasp. "You boys have had quite enough already. And poor Peter and Spiridon haven't even arrived and you're already sloshed!"

Sirius indignantly sputtered, "I am not sloshed! I know my limits, Evans. Am I sloshed, James m'boy?" An incoherent noise was his

response. "I'm fine." Sirius insisted, even as he fumbled with the handle of his mug.

"Apparently not." She glared, grabbing the mead from his grip and signaling the barmaid. Lupin readily handed his over as well.

Sirius pouted as Rosmerta squeezed between crowded tables and collected the men's glasses. "Room'll be ready in a minute, ladies. Another round, boys?" They declined and Lily cut off Sirius' mead request mid-sentence.

The Animagus growled. "You know, ever since you got preggers, you've been no fun, Lilibet. You're like a bloody Dementor at an Irish pub, bleeding the happiness out everything. Don't you agree, Moony?"

"Watch yourself, Black," James warned with little feeling behind it. "Insult my woman and I'll be forced to defend her honor."

"Valentine's Day," Sirius murmured accusingly, shaking his head. "A right sap, you are. Always bloody Valentine's Day." He ineffectively tried to take a flagon of mead from another table. "We should be pranking those witches from Wexford over there now, but no. . . ."

"What did you call me?" Lily snapped at James.

"No comment." The werewolf interrupted before things got out of hand. Lily turned her black look to Remus.

"Don't defend him, Remus," Lily chastised. "You'll only stroke his ego."

Sirius snorted. "That's not the only thing that needs — "

"I wonder where Peter and Spiridon are," James disrupted with a dark look at Sirius' smirk. "They'd better get here quick. I don't think I could stand it if Voldemort got one of them," he growled, staring at the table. The mood around the table grew considerably somber even as the pub chatted on in merriment. Even Sirius sobered a bit. "Dumbledore told me he got the Stapletons last night," James bitterly continued. "Jack and his wife refused join his side. So he murdered little Hannah before their eyes. She wasn't but four years old."

Everyone's face fell at this news. "Come now," Remus began dourly, "Let's not dwell on such morbid thoughts. There'll be better times on the horizon. I'm sure Peter and Spiridon are fine."

Sirius guffawed drunkenly. "Yeah. For all we know Pete's probably cornered some undesirable whore in Knockturn; I'll bet she's a man, too." Lily rolled her eyes and sharply sighed. "And Spiridon? Well, he's got business. Always business. Working with the Battalion and all. S'fun, you know? Just the other day he sent me over to spy on the Ministry and Remus to — "

"I think the whiskey's gone to your head, Padfoot," Remus brashly interrupted, stabbing the gray-eyed Animagus with a dark look. "Now you're talking nonsense." Sirius' cheeks flushed as he realized his gaffe.

Lily chuckled, seemingly unaware that Sirius almost gave his and Remus' secrets away. "Are they here yet? Goodness knows we need an extra hand to put Sirius in his place."

"I think you're doing a fine job of it," Commented a relieved Remus, hunching over the table to sift through the peanuts as Sirius scowled at him, narrowing his eyes.

"Are you scared of a woman, Moony?" He taunted. Lily' expression hardened and even Athena squared her shoulders in intimidation.

"Ordinarily, no," the sandy-haired lycanthrope chuckled. "But, Lily's no ordinary woman." He blushed as both women grinned broadly in his direction. Sirius muttered darkly and stole a few nuts from the bowl.

James, who had been quiet up until now, turned to Lily in concern. "Are you sure you don't want to sit down, Green-Eyes?"

"Rosmerta said the room should be ready soon." She replied. "Besides, if I sit by Sirius, I'm liable to fall victim to my emotions and kill him in a hormonal rage."

James smiled and placed his hand atop Lily's. "Not a jury in the world would convict you." He whispered.

"Hey! I'm still here!" the canine Animagus objected.

"Are you positive?" Lily nodded.

"If Rosmerta says the room'll be done, it'll be done."

"I hope so," Remus nodded, his face exhibiting his worry. "All of this noise and smoke can't be good for the baby — excuse me, babies," he inclined his head at Athena. "Not to mention the very presence of Sirius. The child could be damaged for life." The group laughed loudly at the ridicule and laughed even harder when Sirius shot Remus a death glare.

Lily smiled gently at the boys' concern, soothingly rubbing her rounded swelling. It wasn't overly large, but noticeable. Athena, on the other hand, easily looked seven or eight months along though she was not yet into her fifth month. Harry was glad he was intangible; otherwise he couldn't begin to imagine the type of damage the Entity could inflict if she heard him comparing her waist size to Hagrid's.

"Oh, here's Peter," James announced. "It's about bloody time."

"Hang on," Sirius stopped his hand from waving the rat-like wizard toward their table. "If we bend real low and hide behind our stools, maybe he won't spot us."

Remus cast him a fleeting look before waving the squat man over.

"You know, you're not a prefect anymore, but you still suck the fun out of everything," Sirius sulked, glowering at the werewolf.

"Good: I like it that way. Now we've only got to wait on Spiridon."

Harry immediately scowled as the portly, jittery mess of a dark wizard wedged through the crowd to their table. Sirius slapped him on the back in welcome (Peter nearly toppled the table over in the process), displeasure seemingly forgotten and ordered another round.

"Where've you been? We started without you, you know," Sirius began crossly. "You, my dear Wormtail, have got a lot of catching up to do."

"Yeah, like when are you going tell us about this new job of yours?" Remus chimed.

"What was so important that you were called away?" Lily questioned, leaning on both James and the table (though more on James, but he didn't seem to mind).

Peter's mouth twitched. Harry nearly reached for his wand on instinct. "Oh, ah, soon, soon. It's all in the b-b-beginning stages a-and ... there's n-nothing really worth m-m-mentioning. J-Just business, business, that's all. B-b-business." They nodded in discontent and Harry lowered his brow when his mother's hand reached instinctively for her stomach. He filed that away for later examination, tuning back into the conversation.

Sirius noisily smacked his lips. "B-b-business, eh? Who'd you shag?"

"Sirius!" Lily exclaimed indignantly, shooting apologetic looks to Athena.

"Better yet, who'd want to shag you?" The gray-eyed Animagus rephrased with a mischievous chortle. Peter's brow creased in anger for a split second before he stared down at his lap, stroking his left arm.

Lily's face turned red in anger and disbelief and perhaps even sympathy on Peter's behalf. The plump wizard said nothing, only nervously shaking his head and steadfastly avoiding Lily's rueful gaze. He twisted the napkin in his hands and nibbled on his lip, his beady eyes quivering and his brow glistening.

The red-haired witch turned to Sirius with a fierce look, but before she could snap at him, Rosmerta signaled for them to follow her. Remus and his father immediately stood from their stools to assist them up the stairs, but both women declined. Athena made a final comment about her husband before they disappeared up the dark stairwell.

Harry was quite content to remain in the crowded tavern to see what antics his father and his friends would come up with (and to study Pettigrew more closely), but something gnawed uncomfortably at

him right before he was tugged up the steps. It seemed the Quintessence didn't want them to miss this; Kaltagonus was already halfway up the stairs.

The room was simply furnished, with a lit hearth on one wall, two cozy armchairs, a couch, a coffee table and a rug that had seen many years. A few windows were lined along another wall and Harry could see the darkness stretched out behind the Three Broomsticks.

The pregnant women settled slowly on the couch with a bit of effort as Rosmerta put the finishing touches on their room, dusting the table off with a flick of her wand. "Now, then! We've got the rump steak special we're serving for dinner," Lily made a face rubbed a hand over her bump. "And especially for Saint Valentine's: chocolate gateau with caramelized strawberry filling."

"It sounds exquisite," Athena breathed, exchanging a look with the red-haired witch.

"That would be nice, Rosmerta. Thanks."

The barmaid nodded absently and clacked toward the door. "I'll send Whisky up with a half-platter for you both." She shut the door without a backward glance.

Lily's mouth thinned. "Was she calling us fat?"

"Goodness, I hope not," answered Athena, rubbing the considerable swelling beneath her robes. "Perhaps she only offers it to couples celebrating this day ... for extending the boundaries of love and Eros."

Lily snorted, tapping the jug to pour glasses of water for both of them. "Well, we're certainly extending boundaries, but it's got bog-all to do with love," was her dry response.

"Aha," the Entity chuckled. "I love my children, very much ... but I do not think I can bear another six months of this." Lily offered her a sympathetic look and together they sipped their drinks. Harry folded his arms when Kaltag sighed and muttered something about pregnant women. Lily suddenly gasped and gripped her stomach protectively, worry carved in her expression.

"Lily?"

After a tense moment, the witch smiled unworriedly. "It's nothing. I've been having these sharp pangs today, but they aren't serious. He might be kicking."

"Mm, gas," informed the Celestial as Whisky the house elf shambled into their room and placed the plates, utensils and platter onto the table, bowing low as he exited.

"Dear God," Harry spun around at the Being's exclamation. "Don't tell me they sent me here to listen to two knocked up dames chatting about ... about ... gas and men and, God forbid, their raging libidos!" He groaned pressing the heel of his palms into his eyes.

The two had begun shoving forkfuls of cake into their mouths and humming appreciatively. After several mouthfuls, Athena rubbed her stomach and smiled brightly. "They are quite happy today."

"You can tell?" Lily inquired as she rubbed her own stomach with a grimace.

"Oh, yes," she replied after another bite. "Celestial babies tend to convey waves of energy through the womb that mirror their emotions. Happy pulses generate soft, slow undulating waves of energy; fast and erratic waves indicate they are angry, alarmed, upset." Lily nodded thoughtfully as she chewed. "Feel." Athena took Lily's hand and placed it on her stomach.

Immediately, Lily's creased brow flattened and transformed into a smile. "I feel it." She looked startled when Athena held her palm to the top of her stomach.

"If only you — " The Celestial broke off, her brow furrowing. "Odd," her brown gaze found Lily's. "Your ... I can ... can you not feel it?"

It was Lily's turn to frown. "Feel what?" Her hand immediately settled on her own stomach.

"Just there," Athena moved her hand over a bit. "That pulsing."

"Pulsing?" Lily screwed up her face in bewilderment. "I thought he was kicking."



"No, it is undeniably a pulse. It's ... not quite calm, yet not immediately alarming. Why Lily," the Entity beamed. "Either your child is very powerful or ... you're having a Cherub."

So it came as a surprise to Harry when rather than gaping and becoming a blubbering, excited, hormonal mess, his mother smirked.

And something was very wrong with that smirk.

Her lively green eyes turned into the chilling cold gaze that he'd come to recognize immediately. Her hand instantly came to rest beside Athena's and she patted the rounded bump. "Yes, I had an inkling." Even her voice sounded different: strained, as if she were trying to convince Athena she was speaking. "He will be a force to reckon with."

If Athena was at all surprised by Lily's cold reaction, she did not show it. "I had an appointment today."

Harry issued a sigh of relief when his mother's alter ego disappeared and she became the caring, kindly witch he'd always admired. "And...?"

"The twins are doing just fine."

Kaltagonus straightened, his expression drawn. He moved closer to the two women with a disbelieving frown. "Twins." He whispered.

Harry's eyebrows disappeared into his fringe. "Twins?" He echoed, glancing at the Being. "She still thinks she's having twins?" Then why were there three Smythe children? Frowning, he returned to the discussion.

Lily took a sip from her glass, her confusion evident. "You still think so? I thought you couldn't tell how many until the actual birth, what with all that rampant energy and essence. How do you — ?"

"Spiridon tells me nothing, but I can tell he knows something. Moreover, I can feel it." Athena staunchly declared, her expression fierce. "I just know I am blessed with twins. It feels ... right."

Lily snorted and stabbed her chocolate cake. "And if you end up with four or five?"

"That will not happen. Only two."

"Yes, I've heard of that," Lily thoughtfully nodded. "What's it called, mother's intuition? No ... gestational dementia, that's it." Athena gave her a glare, but Harry could tell there was no real feeling behind it. Lily laughed, patting her friend's shoulder. "I'm only joking, Athena. Goodness knows I've had my moments. I made James set up a Gringotts account for our little one already. . . ."

The women continued to talk of womanly things that set Harry's eyes rolling every ten seconds. Harry wanted to go down to the pub to see what his father and Sirius and Remus were talking about, but knew something important was about to come up. He could feel stiffness in the air, even though it was only a memory. The women gave nothing away, and it seemed they didn't even notice, instead continuing their avid exchange.

Unfortunately, conversation bordered on the babies ("You're setting up the nursery now? But you're not due until early September, August at least!" Exclaimed Lily.), to wedding plans ("I've no desire to waddle down the aisle. That's hardly romantic."), to overprotective fathers ("Spiridon's concern for my well-being has extended to you. He always wants to know how you are doing. I should be jealous," Athena had smiled.). Harry found out quite shockingly that his mother's family had no idea she was pregnant ("They want me to visit, but I'm afraid of how they'll react when they find out this extra fat isn't just from Cauldron Cakes. . . ."). Thankfully the conversation ended on a somewhat interesting topic: baby names.

"I was considering names recently." Athena began after Whisky popped in and set up a tea service.

"Really?" Lily motioned for her to continue.

"For my boy: Starbuck or Philagoros?" A hoot of laughter bubbled out of Kaltagonus.

"Seriously, she should've named him that. Maybe I could get the Council to change that part of history."

Lily paused, a look of surprise passing over her face. She hid her amused smile behind her tea. "I think Starbuck is lovely."

Athena grinned proudly. "Yes, Spiridon thinks so." She missed the bitter look Lily briefly made. "And Metis or Nikola for a girl."

"Nikola is very pretty," Commented Lily.

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes."

Athena nodded blissfully and carded her fingers through the crimson folds over her abdomen. "And you?"

Harry noticed Kaltagonus' jaw clench, anticipating her response. His resolve seemed to be chipping away with every memory.

"Cassidy." Kaltag made a face. Harry laughed.

"A strong name," Athena remarked. "And for a girl?"

Harry's blood turned cold when the coldness seeped back into Lily's eyes and her face hardened. He was sure her eyes flickered gold for a second, but it must have been a trick of the firelight.

Lily shook her head, her expression turning into one of unquestionable perception. "I know it's a boy. His name will be Cassidy."

Despite the tense atmosphere of the room, Athena chuckled. "Ah! Which of us possesses the gestational dementia now? At any rate, it is a good name for either a boy or a girl."

"He is a boy." Insisted Lily.

"So sure of herself, this one." Kaltag shook his head and grumbled. The women went quiet, their teacups and saucers quietly clinking against the roar of the fireplace. Lily's eyes were calculated, her expression stoic as she drank her tea and rubbed soothing circles on her stomach. Her face was tight and her brow was pinched. When she set her cup down, only then did Harry notice she was shaking.

"Something the matter?" Athena scooted closer in concern.

Lily bit her lip, also biting back a wince. "I'm not sure. It's Cassidy," she grimaced. "He's a bit agitated. He's kicking rather fiercely and moving around." Athena pursed her lips and her forehead wrinkled.

"It is much too early for his arrival."

"I don't think it's contractions," the green-eyed witch shook her head. "I think it's something else. He's only been like this a few other times: Most notably when James and I first encountered the Dark Lord Voldemort. I think ... I think it's a sign. A warning." The Entity of War and Wisdom steadily held the young woman's gaze. They seemed to have a silent conversation only they could understand, leaving Harry and the other Being puzzled.

With a nod, Athena cradled her back and belly, standing awkwardly. "Stay here. I shall summon our men and do not argue with me," she warned as she shuffled to the door. Grasping the door handle, she turned back to Lily. "My husband will know what to do."

But before Athena could turn the handle the very foundation of the Three Broomsticks shook. Harry instinctually tried to brace himself but remembered he was intangible: which also meant his wand wasn't of much use in the memory.

The table and armchairs tipped over, shattering the glass and spilling tea and cake across the floor. Lily clutched her stomach as the room lurched and Athena fell to the floor, thankfully on her back. Harry struggled to keep his balance as another explosion erupted, this time in the tavern below. He could already hear the screams and shouts of the patrons in the pub. He vaguely wondered how his father was faring.

Lily exhaled sharply and shielded her stomach with her arm. Through her disheveled locks she groaned and looked toward the entryway where Athena lay sprawled. "Athena," she whispered, standing on wobbly legs to hobble toward the fallen Entity. "Athena?" With a sharp wince she gripped her stomach and fell to her knees beside the Celestial. "Ath—Athena?" When she called her name this time, the Entity's eyes hazily blinked open and her hands instantly reached for her bulge.

"The children!" She breathed, sitting up immediately despite Lily's protests. "How are you? And the baby?"

Lily jerkily nodded. "All right. He's still troubled."

They leaned on each other, grimacing as they made an effort to stand. "What's happened? What's going on?"

"I don't know," Lily stared around at the room in shambles. She pulled out her wand and stared at the door. "But we've got to get out of here. It's not safe for us and — "

The windows along the wall shattered with such a force that both women were thrown back against the door. An invisible shield seemed to deflect the shards of glass and smoke from harming the expectant mothers and for that, Harry was grateful.

Until the smoke cleared from the large gap in the wall and he saw a very familiar figure emerge.

"Voldemort." Kaltagonus unnecessarily stated. The crimson-eyed form slowly glided into the room, eyeing the two women in a mixture of amusement and disgust. The young wizard felt the familiar anger surge through him as the sorcerer sneered down at them. He looked rather normal now, his eyes a dark, sadistic red but his skin and face as handsome as the younger Tom Riddle's from his second year. He looked human.

Harry was mildly proud neither woman showed fear as they slowly slid up the wall and to their feet, their hands shielding their swells. The anger and determination in Lily's eyes was evident. "What do you want?" Her tone was strong and unwavering and her wand was held stiffly at her side.

The pause between the question and response was filled by the sounds of pandemonium beneath them in the pub. "I would think the answer was obvious," Voldemort drawled, his robes billowing about him as he paced, wand in hand. "But as you are a Mudblood, it more than likely requires a bit of time and intellect on your part to sort out the solution."

Anger flared in Harry at his words. "However, since time is of the essence, I shall enlighten you, Mudblood; I will only say this once. I have a proposition for you." His eyes glittered maliciously in the darkness. "Join me, and you, your idiot of a pureblood partner and the bastard you are carrying will be spared."

"How dare you," Athena quietly hissed, moving her large body in front of Lily's.

Voldemort flicked his wand at her dismissively but a sudden ripple of energy thwarted the jet of red light across the Entity's chest. In a matter of seconds a goatskin breastplate was fitted across her bosom and a long, golden rod was in her hand. Her stance was furious and the room radiated with her wrath.

The Dark Lord leered in mild astonishment. "Athene, daughter of Zeus," he silkily purred. "Daughter wrought of lust and legend. Such a pity you wear that aegis; my legend would be fed considerably had I killed the famed goddess of War."

She inclined her head. "Lord Voldemort. Your power is preceded only by your arrogance. I await the happy day of your downfall."

"Then you shall wait forever."

"Oh, God," Kaltag moaned. "My mother's flirting with the Dark Lord!" Harry hadn't seen it that way, but decided he would leave it at that. It wouldn't do to get nauseous in a memory and return to the corporeal world to find that he'd suffocated on his own vomit. Clearing that grisly thought from his mind, he returned to the exchange.

"Why are you giving me a choice?" Lily asked distrustfully, her wand at the ready. "The rumors say you slay and torture all that block your path without a passing glance. Why are you sparing me? What do you want with me?"

The dark wizard rolled his wand between his fingers. "Ah, I find it amusing that you think this is about you," he sneered, moving to circle the broken furniture. The women defensively mirrored him as well. "But such is the mentality of a filthy Muggleborn, and a woman, to boot: always thinking about themselves. 'Tis no wonder this world suffers so."

"No, no, silly girl. My dilemma is not with you: it's with that spawn you are carrying."

Lily's arm tightened around her midsection. Her grip on her wand made her knuckles turn white. "Yes," he whispered sibilantly. "It's that half-blood creature your womb holds. It is a hindrance to my authority. I know, Lily Evans," his eyes glittered with malice. "I know of the prophecy in which your child and I am ensnared." Lily's lips tightened. "I know the child growing in your womb is powerful; it exudes of a power unprecedented, a power that flummoxes even the greatest of minds. A power Albus Dumbledore himself cannot contain." He spat the name as he stood before the fire.

"You would be a fool to trust the life of your child with Dumbledore. He pledges you sanctuary, yet here I am, before your very eyes, and the great Dumbledore is nowhere to be found. He alleges the privacy of Sibyll Trelawney's prophecy, yet I know of it. You foolish girl: Dumbledore cares nothing for you except your child. That is what he wants, what he will wield into a weapon not only to destroy my reign, but you, as well. And when its task is complete ... there will be no need for the prophesied savior. He will kill it." Harry bristled at Voldemort's false words, painting the headmaster in an unfavorable light.

"Either you join me and live, your child keeps its life and is raised under my education, or I kill it. The choice is yours: do you readily accept, or foolishly decline?" He coldly held his wand at his side and squared his shoulders in a menacing manner, awaiting her decision. Harry needlessly had his hand on his wand and boiled at Voldemort's words. Never did he want the dark wizard to die a horrible death than he did now. Athena held her wand leveled in warning, her eyes burning in rage.

Lily, however, narrowed her eyes and stared Voldemort down. With one hand wrapped around her round belly, she slowly lowered her wand with the other. Harry was nearly panicking at this action when he noticed something completely dark and familiar about Lily.

She wasn't herself again.

Her face went slack and her head lolled as if she passed out. A moment later, her head snapped back and her face was hard. Her eyes shot open and narrowed in her sockets and her mouth fixed in

a grim line. Fire danced in her eyes, but upon closer inspection, Harry noted it wasn't fire, not even a trick of the light.

Her eyes were golden again. He swallowed thickly; nothing good could come out of this. He almost felt sorry for Voldemort. Almost.

Lily's answer was curt and calm. "Silly human," her resonant voice rumbled, "I decline."

Before Voldemort could raise his wand in defense, a jet of golden light burst from Lily's stomach and the Dark Lord was thrown against the wall. The dangerous-looking energy swirled around him, pinning him to the wall and concentrated around his neck. The display was altogether horrifying as more energy surged when Voldemort made to reach for his wand.

"You dare to threaten me?"

Athena stood by in surprise and disbelief as Lily calmly stood there, as if she were merely casting cleaning spells, her unborn child rallying its power to slay the dark wizard. Harry blinked, horror-struck and gawking as he swung his gaze to Voldemort. His mind was reeling as he'd seen a glimmer in Voldemort's eyes he had never seen before.

Fear.

"Do you know who I am?"

The Dark Lord's eyes were fearfully wide as he gazed not on Lily, but her round bulge pulsing with power. It was as if he knew he would meet his match, as if he knew there was nothing more he could do.

As if he knew he would die.

"I am power."

Voldemort was thrown back against the wall.

"I am fury."

He bared his teeth so as not to audibly wince.



"I am death."

His red eyes were furious with emotion Harry was never privy to witness.

"I am fear."

Lily's eyes were glowing with such intensity Harry thought they were about to explode.

"Fear bows ... to no one."

The vortex of energy had nearly shielded the sorcerer in golden radiance when the door burst open behind the women. In that split second, Voldemort fell to the floor and Lily's concentration was broken as she faced the door in shock, her expression dazed. Athena raised her wand to aim at the new arrival and that was all the time Voldemort needed. In a matter of seconds he recovered, his face contorted in absolute fury, and his wand was in hand, aimed at Lily's half-turned form.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Harry yelled out as the jet of green light shot from the end of his wand, hurtling in Lily's direction. Time seemed to slow as Lily turned, her green eyes wide and shining in the Killing Curse's glare. During that time, all Harry could think was, no one but him had survived the curse; his mother was as good as dead. But one nagging voice (that vaguely sounded like Kallagony) in the back of his mind gnawed at his logic.

If your mother died, how'd she have you, genius?

As if the memory had heard his thoughts, he watched as Lily's face blanched in certain comprehension. Her expression was alarmed as she screamed, clutching her womb defensively. The green light had almost reached her, when something extraordinary occurred.

With one last explosion of energy, Lily's unborn child let out a giant burst of golden light, stopping the emerald death in its flight and setting off a ring of pulsing energy to erupt outward over the land.

Voldemort exclaimed in fury and brandished his wand with a vengeance. "Crucio!"

Lily fell to the ground with a cry and Harry could only watch in horror as his mother twitched on the ground clutching her middle, the painful stomach spasms visible beneath her blouse. Athena swung her wand at the intruder (who Kaltag had exclaimed earlier to be Mystikos) and turned to the tortured Lily. She aimed the gold rod steadily at the Dark Lord before the room violently began to shake and her wand fell from her grasp.

"No, no, no! What now?" The Being demanded, his eyes wide and little more than apprehensive.

Voldemort stopped tormenting the red-haired witch long enough to lose his balance and right himself with the help of the smashed wall. Athena ungracefully fell to her knees and crawled toward Lily, still shaking with the after effects of the Cruciatus Curse. Mystikos had leapt over the broken furniture to join the young Voldemort on the other side, both dark men's suspicion masking their fear.

Harry had just enough time to wonder what the hell was happening, when it happened. Lily arched off the floor with an inhuman scream, throwing her head back and shaking uncontrollably. Her eyes went from watery green to angry yellow and finally, blazing white in their sockets.

Beneath the pull of her top, Harry could see the obvious bump in continuous paroxysms, almost pulsing as if ready to burst. Athena moved to embrace Lily in an awkward upright position, chest to chest and their swollen bellies touching as the room shook with more violence and power. The more the floors quaked, the more violent the seizure became until finally, Lily's cry turned into a deep, pain-filled moan. He thought her torture was about to end, he wanted out of the memory. He couldn't stand watching his mother in such grief. Harry cursed the Quintessence for sending them there; what the hell was so important in this memory that they had to watch Lily convulse in agony?

Then, he saw it.

A broad golden rope of energy slithered from Lily's womb and into Athena's, and finally the redhead went limp. Harry gaped, speechless.

He suddenly knew where the third baby came from: his mother.

Wide-eyed and thunderstruck, he turned toward the equally flabbergasted Being beside him. He could now see why certain things about him were so familiar: his hair was the main factor, it was slightly darker than Lily's; he had her complexion; their chins were the same and they even had the same nose! It ... it was true, it wasn't some nasty dream. The Quintessence wasn't lying. Everything was true.

Kaltagonus Smythe was his brother.

Harry felt as if someone had delivered a swift uppercut to his stomach. With a shuddering sigh, he looked at Voldemort's area and let out a breath when he realized neither of them had witnessed the shifting of essences. Which meant Voldemort had no idea the Child of Phoenix was still alive.

Which meant that Voldemort had no idea Harry had a sibling. A brother. Kaltagonus. Harry felt his chest tightening, robbing him of breath. He had a brother.

At Athena's startled gasp, the earthquake stopped, and the dust began to settle around the room. Voldemort straightened his black robes and aimed his wand at the standing women, still trembling, a curse on his lips and Harry's hand on his wand before the dark wizard paused.

A chilling smirk slowly spread over his face as he stared at the quivering Lily, lowering his wand. Harry narrowed his eyes and followed his gaze to his mother, feeling nauseous as he saw what had Voldemort so pleased.

Thick red and gold liquid ran down her legs, pooling on the floor beneath her. She followed his gaze and turned white at the sight of it, dropping to her knees in puzzlement. Harry's heart skipped a beat as Lily dipped her fingertips in the shiny puddle in a subdued manner.

Lazily fixing his cloak, Voldemort threw the ashen witch a triumphant look. "Well, my task is complete. I am almost sorry it had to come to this." He tutted: shaking his head and mocking sympathy. "Dear girl, you have my sincerest regrets for your loss. I do hope this does not devastate your Saint Valentine's celebration." Athena gave a battle cry as she wielded her wand with ferocity.

Voldemort's laughter echoed throughout the room long after he Disapparated with a sharp 'crack'. The remains of the room were lit in a soft verdant glow as the Dark Mark suddenly materialized over the Three Broomsticks.

Mystikos lingered behind, smiling in the Entity's direction. "Forgive me, beloved. I hope you will come to understand this when we are together once more — " He rippled out of sight when a nasty blast was sent his way, hurtling into the empty darkness.

"Oh," Harry moaned, his breathing uneven as he watched his mother stare at the blood on her robes, skirt and limbs. "Oh, no."

The once bright-eyed witch sat dully on the debris-ridden floorboards, her mouth slightly open and her eyes as large as saucers as she stared at the mess. Her skin rivaled the color of the snow outside, the small amount of freckles even diminishing into the endless white but now there was red, so much red all over her, all over her hands, soaking into her skin and dripping from her soul.

Athena's wand and aegis rippled into obscurity and she knelt down, or as much as her round middle would allow. She carefully placed her hand on Lily's shoulder, tilting her head to better look at the unnaturally quiet witch. "Lily?"

There was no answer. The woman in question sat still on the floor, her blank eyes fixed on the red smears on her hand. Ever so slowly Lily came out of her stupor in silence, though the upheaval could still be heard downstairs and the floors mildly shook with the force of spells. Harry was brought back to the present at Athena's sharp intake of breath. Harry wished he would die at the moment; Lily's bloodied hand rested on her nearly flattened abdomen.

"Lily..." Athena gingerly began. With wary movement, the Entity settled her hand on the witch's once-swollen stomach.

Harry's heart sank as she stifled a sob.

James suddenly burst through the door as Lily screamed.

ooooo

(St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Wednesday, February 14, 1979. 10:22 PM.)

When the new memory settled, Harry found himself in the once familiar corridors of St. Mungo's hospital. The hall was festive, celebrating the holiday with floating hearts and sweet-scented flowers spraying perfume on passersby.

It was completely out of place.

Rather than the disturbingly calm atmosphere he remembered when first entering a specified ward, the passageway was pure chaos with Healers in lime-green robes bustling about, floating trays and bed linens and occupied stretchers behind them.

All along the corridor, bodies squeezed against the wall as the medical staff demanded room to pass in the hall, breezing by with one moaning patient after the other. The portraits on the walls were shifting about from frame to frame, gossiping behind their Healer hats about the attack in Hogsmeade.

In the thick of the crowd, Harry spotted his father's messy mop of hair beside a door that was shut. He walked through the ailing patients and over to his father, discovering Lupin, Sirius and Peter waiting with him. Remus was heavily favoring his left leg and Sirius (who looked quite sober now) had a trail of dried blood down the side of his face. Peter and James looked dirtied, but no worse for the wear.

Lily wasn't with them, but from the tortured howls coming from behind the door, Harry knew she was in that room. He felt his heart clench at his mother's pain. Neither wizard spoke to each other nor offered words of comfort; instead, they all stared at various places about the corridor — the portrait of a long deceased Healer, the dazzlingly white floor, the floating crystal bubbles — anything but at each other. The faraway looks remained on their faces as James broke the silence.

"Well," he began faintly, "Still plan on celebrating tonight?"

"James — "

"Go on," he replied in an emotionless tone. "No point in all of us staying here. I'll ... I'll wait for the Healer from St. Agnes'."

"Don't be daft, you prat," Sirius settled his hand on the wizard's shoulder. James' mask broke for a second but Harry caught a range of emotions: fear, anger, numbness, sorrow: to name a few. "We're staying, Prongs. For both of you." James' lip trembled, but he looked to the ground and nodded. The wizards again lapsed into silence. Only the din of the hospital and Lily's sobs echoed through the corridor.

The four continued to stare around the passageway until Remus motioned to someone fast approaching with a vengeance. A plump woman with a creased, determined expression carved a path through the moaning bodies and Trainee Healers, her dull yellow Healer robes flapping around her. She carried a carpetbag that clinked as she marched, and the emblem on her badge was a wand resting in front of a white rabbit surrounded by light pink and light blue bunnies.

She stopped enough to give James a sympathetic look, though it came off more intimidating than it should have. Lily's screams briefly grew louder as she entered the room and shut the door behind her. Not long after the arrival of the Healer did the wizards again stir at Spiridon's approach.

"How is she?" He breathlessly asked, searching each of the men's faces for an answer.

James impassively shrugged, staring ahead at the wall. "Listen for yourself. How do you think she is?" Spiridon averted his gaze and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"And Athena?" Remus inquired.

The General shook his head. "The same, mostly. The babies were not too pleased with all the activity and are causing her to feel a bit

unsettled. The Healers insist on examining her now, but she is asking for Lily." James pursed his lips but did not answer.

They stood against the wall quietly, vaguely aware of the disturbing calm that had settled in Lily's room. Her cries had ended and Harry wasn't sure if it was by Silencing Charm or if they'd sedated her. The door swung open and Harry barely caught a glimpse of his mother arranged carefully in her bed, layered with many blankets. The St. Agnes' Healer stepped out of the room with her clipboard sighing, pulling off her matching pointed hat.

"James Potter?"

Spiridon immediately asked, "How is she?" The others threw him a strange look.

"Are you her husband?"

"He is," Sirius pointed to James when he didn't speak up. "Her fiancé, actually."

The woman frowned and nodded. "May I please have a moment alone with him?"

"Whatever you need to say can be said in front of them." James inclined his head at his friends. Frowning, the Healer nodded.

"I'm Healer Elphinstone from St. Agnes' Center for Witches and Children," she introduced formally. "And I've treated your wife, her vital signs are — "

"Just cut to the chase," James interrupted with a glare. "She's lost the baby, hasn't she?"

"She suffered a combustive miscarriage, due to fetal-maternal barrier failure."

"No," James rasped. "She lost the baby not to that medical mumbo-jumbo you're spouting. Our child is dead because that — that bastard — that coward who calls himself a Dark Lord killed my child, didn't he?"

The Healer's stoic face was answer enough. James exhaled sharply and buried his face in his hands, sinking to the ground. Sirius and Remus immediately crouched beside him; Peter looked at a loss for what to do.

"She's in shock, now," continued the Healer. "She will feel the full effects tomorrow. There's nothing more I can do but heal the physical damage."

"C-can they have o-others? Children?" Peter babbled. Harry wanted to punch him in the face.

The Healer's brow knit in thought. "That is difficult to answer. Her womb could be fine to carry another pregnancy, but then again, it might not. We do not know that for sure unless she comes in for further testing. The sooner, the better."

Harry's chest tightened as he watched his father dig his fingers in his eyes under the rim of his glasses. If one looked close enough, they'd be able to see the wetness at each corner. He hoarsely breathed, shaking his head slowly; Harry thought he saw the wizard's shoulders tremble slightly, but he himself was too numb to care.

With a sniff, James gruffly shook his head to clear it and addressed the Healer. "Can I see her?" He nodded his thanks when the woman gestured for him to enter the room. Sirius and Remus slapped the miserable wizard on his shoulders, squeezing them in support. Peter patted him on the back and Spiridon peeked in the doorway of the room, catching a glimpse of the red-haired witch before the door was closed behind James.

"You should, um ..." Sirius swallowed, looking as close to tears as James had. "You should get back to Athena. I don't think any of us can handle any more devastation today."

Spiridon leaned on the doorframe shaking his sable-haired head solemnly. "I think I'll stay here a while for Athene ... but mostly for Lily. And James." He added after a moment. Sirius narrowed his eyes a fraction, but soon nodded.

"Excuse me, General?" the Celestial's brow furrowed as a Healer in lime-green robes advanced. "Could I have a word?"



"Not now." He said grumpily, resting on the frame.

"It's important."

"Not. Now."

"It's about your wife," the Healer sternly persisted, looking quite cross and holding his clipboard tightly.

This, of course, got the man's attention. He stood straight and fell in step with the Healer, who motioned for him to follow. Harry was content to stay with his father's friends until they heard word about Lily, but that invisible tug seized him and he had no choice but to follow them down the hall, albeit angrily. This couldn't be more important than his parents' heartache! "How is she?"

"We've examined her — tests, diagnostics and all," the Healer gestured with his hands, "And everything is fine. Your wife and children are a bit exhausted, but safe."

"That's fantastic." Spiridon replied, distractedly looking back to where Lupin, Sirius and Pettigrew were milling about. "All three are fine?"

"Yes," the Healer nodded, stopping beside a closed door. "All three fetuses and your wife are just fine." That certainly got Harry's attention.

"Ama — " Spiridon brusquely broke off, staring at the Healer in misunderstanding. "Pardon, I must have misread you. All ... three?"

The Healer gave him a strange look. "Yes, sir." Harry's mind was reeling.

The General blinked, his eyebrows joined in disbelief. "How—how, when not even our own Mender could tell how many she holds in her womb?" He demanded. "You realize she is a Celestial?"

"Of course," the Healer replied, his tone offended. "We've run tests to observe your wife's blood circulation. We have discovered it to be taking three times the normal amount of time to circulate her body,

which is no cause for concern: it only means there is more than one child in her womb. At first we believed it to be four cycles — "

"Four cycles?"

"But it was a minor miscalculation. It is most assuredly three, General." The Healer stepped closer as Spiridon's expression conveyed disbelief, amazement and exhaustion all in one. "With Celestial mothers, her essence circulates her body and the child to maintain the divine balance and the gestation. Along with my colleagues, I have traced the source of the blood and essence flow, finding three strong strands: undoubtedly, your three children."

Spiridon was exceptionally quiet. Harry felt a headache coming on. The third child: it had already bound with Athena. The third child: His mother's child.

"I advise you, however, to consult with your Mender ... Diocletian?" Spiridon nodded. "Fine Mender, that man. Have him recheck our diagnoses as soon as possible. Is ... is something wrong, sir?"

Spiridon was gazing unseeingly down the corridor where three of the Marauders were standing. "Three."

"Yes, sir," the Healer mistakenly thought the man was talking to him. "Any father would be proud of that."

Spiridon slowly shook his head. "How can it be? That would mean ... that ... " his eyes rounded to the size of saucers as wails suddenly resonated down the hallway and the three wizards tensed. The General gaped.

Spiridon sharply breathed out, "Lily." Harry's heart leapt as Spiridon seemed to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. He knew! He knew what had happened to his mother's child!

"Ah, Miss Evans," the Healer clucked his tongue. "Tragedy what's happened to her, eh? That baby never stood a chance. This Dark Lord, this You-Know-Who ... much too powerful. I'm surprised she even survived."

"Be silent, wizard: you haven't a clue what that woman went through." Spiridon hissed. The Healer obeyed, his expression

startled. "Carrying a child that was ten times greater in power than she, suffering through his control and that child had more than enough power to defeat Voldemort — " the Healer flinched, " — and now he's probably depleted of his strength! I spent all my time and energy watching her, waiting for that boy to be born and now this! Voldemort's ruined the will of the Cosmos! And you have no idea. . . ." Spiridon trailed off, looking alarmed at what had come out of his mouth. Harry gaped, finally noticing Kaltagonus had been there the entire time.

Spiridon knew. Spiridon knew about Golradir. He knew from the moment he walked into the museum. All this time he had been watching Lily, he knew. He knew ... he knew Athena was now carrying Golradir, the third child.

Kaltagonus.

Harry suddenly felt sick.

"Um ... General?" the Healer tentatively called. Spiridon blinked, and Harry suddenly felt invigorated. If Spiridon knew, he'd tell his parents, and they could get the baby back. Spiridon was good; Spiridon was trustworthy. Of course he'd tell his parents. He would tell them.

But Spiridon remained rooted to the spot. Harry's excited mood waned a little. He had to tell them. He just had to. Spiridon was good. He'd invited all of them over at his house for Yule without raising a fuss. He was strict, but he loved his children. Spiridon was a great man, like Dumbledore. Harry felt his insides quiver with unease. He was good. He was. Still, the General's gaze was fixed on the door where the wails emanated. He was good.

He was good.

Spiridon was good.

The queasiness in Harry's stomach intensified as a chilling smile stretched over Spiridon's face in spite of Lily's howls of anguish down the hall. "Sir?"

"Everything is in order." The General quietly answered. His lips twitched as Lily suddenly cried out louder. Harry's stomach dropped.

No, no, no, no, no ... this wasn't supposed to happen! Spiridon — he was good! He would do the right thing! He would tell them!

The General pursed his lips. "As it should be ... in fact, this is the best news I've received all day." His eyes were cold as he calmly said this, igniting such a fire in Harry that the young wizard snarled. "I apologize for my lapse in common sense; it's been an exhausting night."

"Y-Yes..."

No, no, no, no, Harry chanted in his mind. He was good, he was good. He had to be good. . . .

Spiridon grimly smiled at the Healer and placed his hand on the doorknob. "Thankfully, all is well. Now, if you do not mind, I would like to take my wife home. After all, this stress cannot be good for her..." he curtly glanced down the hall as Lily's sobs reverberated down the corridor. His dark eyes hardened even more. "...Or our three children."

"YOU MONSTER!"

Harry lunged forward at the memory-Spiridon, only to be blinded by the whipping winds and whirl of color.

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A/N: Whew! Anyone suspect Spiridon's involvement? Honestly, was that a twist or what?

A/N 2: I'm not going to be a review Nazi and put a gun to the next chapter's head and say, "give me 400 reviews or I'll blow this chapter's brains out!" So I'll just say, please review: I would very much appreciate it if you do, and thanks. ;)

## Chapter Thirty-One: Me Against the World, Part III

"I'LL KILL YOU!"

The Quintessence swam back into view and Harry found himself on all fours on the forest floor, pounding at the dirt. "I'll kill you! I'll kill ... I'll. . . ." Harry's pummeling slowed and he pressed his forehead to the cool earth, breathing deeply. His emotions were raw and he felt as if he would burst into tears at any moment. That bastard! That monster! He knew! All this time, he looked straight into his eyes, mocked him with kindness and compassion and he knew!

"What the hell was that?" said Kaltagonus, his tone deceptively calm, his face pinched in severity. "Huh? What the HELL WAS THAT?"

"Behave yourself, boy!" Agamemnon scolded.

"He would never do such a thing like that!" Harry couldn't believe Kaltag's denial. Didn't he see it with his own two eyes? Didn't he hear the Healer tell the man about the three babies? Didn't he see Spiridon's cold-heartedness at his mother's — their mother's — anguish?

"Boy!"

"He may be a bastard," Kaltag shouted over the Mycenaean king, "But my father would never — EVER — take a child from its mother! You're lying!" The trees stirred restlessly in the face of the Being's rage. The shadows wavered, growing darker as the earth groaned.

"How dare you accuse us of such — "

"I KNOW HIM! HE WOULD NEVER DO THAT!" Harry's heart clenched as the Being's voice cracked.

Andromache's eyes gleamed sympathetically. "You must understand — "

"No!" Kaltagonus snapped, shaking his head furiously. "I won't believe it. I won't believe your lies."

"It was for the best — "

"I WON'T HEAR OF IT!" Kaltag bellowed, his face turning bright red in his fury. The forest was shaking violently around them, trees and plants bending to and fro and the wind whipping the foliage. Harry had never seen such power wrought from anger; it was amazing, and yet, a terrible sight. "NO MORE LIES!"

The atmosphere was very tight with opposition, despite the retaliation of the earth. Kaltag was panting deeply from exertion as he glared murderously at the Quintessence. His anger finally seemed to give out as the winds stopped and the trees swayed to a halt. There was a stint in conversation before Calchas quietly replied, "He did, child."

Harry felt his chest tighten in panic, distress, and most of all, anger. Kaltagonus' eyes were glazed, panic, anger, disbelief and defiance written all over them. He suddenly pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes, straightening to his full height. No longer was he the picture of vulnerability.

"I don't believe you." He silently snarled. "You're all lying."

Agamemnon suddenly roared, "I command you to respect your elders!"

"I've had enough of you. Why don't you go fu—"

"Kaltagonus!" Calchas clapped his hands, his once expressionless face drawn in aggravation. "Now is not the time for trivial disputes." He glared at both quarrelers equally. "I know what you have just seen was upsetting — "

"That's an understatement." Harry angrily barked as he wiped his face and sat up.

" — But whether you choose to believe us or not, we must continue: time is of the essence. Are you prepared to go on?" The prefect took several deep breaths to calm himself before he crossed his arms and looked away, his shoulders trembling. He was obviously more affected than he let on, but the Council either didn't notice or disregarded it. When he remained silent, that seemed to be all the answer Calchas was going to get. "The Great Surge of 1979 was caused by the collision of great power between Lord Voldemort, Lily Evans, and Golradir."

"The Surge was a great misstep, throwing our plans, or rather, yours, out of effect." Odysseus added.

"My plans?"

"Yes."

"What plans?" Kaltag heavily snapped.

"Continuing your mission, of course," Hector joined. "Seeking out your brothers until you have spilled their blood." Kaltagonus looked rather sick at this.

"You should have been more powerful," Hector continued, "but the Surge expended most of your power. Had you not reacted to save the witch Lily Evans from certain death, you would have been the most powerful specimen in all the dimensions."

"Your power, combined with that of Lily Evans' was a terrible sight to behold. It is unparalleled. Had you survived the full gestation in her womb, I am most certain that all children she bore after you would scarcely equal you in power. But Lord Voldemort attacked and Golradir had an incomplete transferal, therefore fragments of his abilities could have been left behind in Lily Evans' magic — "

"Wait, wait, wait, give your mouth a rest," Kaltag sighed, wearily running his fingers through his hair. Harry noticed he was still shaking. "Harry." The wizard jumped at the mention of his name. "Harry's an elemental."

"Apparently." Hector nodded.

"He claims he hasn't had the abilities since this year." Kaltag argued.

Hector inclined his head. "Wizard majority manifests itself in the latter stages of development, so yes, this is possible."

"Or the presence of constant divine energy mutated his abilities to forced fruition."

Harry made a noise of protest, scandalized. "Are you calling me a mutant?"

"So you're saying my presence caused his abilities to come about; you're saying," Kaltag shook his head, working his jaw after a long pause. "That—that Harry ... could have more of my — Golradir's power in him?"

"Yes."

"It is a possibility."

"Passed on to him...?"

"By Lily Evans, your mother." Penelope responded.

Kaltag wildly gestured. "And ... she got it from — "

"You, Golradir."

"Kaltagonus. And she was attacked — "

"Because of prophecy." Odysseus replied. "Because Lord Voldemort did not want a rival in power."

Kaltag dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. "And it's all because of — "

"You." Agamemnon smirked.

Kaltag released a disgusted sigh and began pacing. "He got the right people ... but the wrong baby."

"No," Calchas corrected, "He did get a powerful babe: but a year too early."

"But..." Kaltag exhaled sharply, raising his arms and slapping them on his thighs in defeat. "Why?" He helplessly asked.

"Ah, that is another story, but not ours to tell," Andromache resumed with an enigmatic smile. "As you can imagine, Lily Evans took the loss of her child very seriously."



Harry snorted, balling his fists in anger. "As you can imagine? Yeah: I can imagine, all right. I can imagine the sound of my mother SCREAMING and WEEPING and BAWLING over your failure!"

"She fell into a deep depression, a feeling of worthlessness filled the void left by Golradir's forcible absence. She was none the wiser over her possession, however, Golradir is not someone you easily forget; such was her magic's connection with him that she knew, deep down, something was amiss. Knowing that, perhaps, is the worst feeling of all. Lily Evans became depressed.

"The wizard James Potter tried everything, but could never fully prevent her mind from dwelling on the tragedy. It was a lasting effect from the control; she became attached to the child, and remained discouraged not because of its loss, but because her magic still sensed the child living.

"Many thought her absurd, foolish; insane when she told them Golradir still remained. But she kept firm to her beliefs, until one day, she went too far." Andromache lowered her gaze briefly before she flatly smiled. In the corner, the shadows wavered between the trees. "But I am advancing far ahead of the tale."

"You are aware of the individual called Diocletian?" Calchas took over.

The Being scoffed. "How could I forget? The psycho kidnapped me in fifth year."

"True to his word, Spiridon — "

"The lying, cheating, deceiving monster," Harry interjected with a scowl. He didn't know what he'd do when he saw Spiridon again. He felt like trying out the Killing Curse on him; he was no better than Voldemort, stealing his brother away from his mother like that. He knew!

" — Brought the goddess Athene to him for further examination. Diocletian, having heard of the conflict that fateful night, was very eager to see if any anomalies had befallen his patient. But he never anticipated what he would discover in his findings."

"Well? What'd he find?" Questioned Kaltagonus. Harry nodded in query though they couldn't see him.

Hector narrowed his eyes and thinned his lips. "The mass of excess power, the runt fetus he had detected in the previous examination, that he had predicted should and would perish?" Kaltag nodded for him to continue. "Tripled in size and power in under a sun's rotation."

"From conversation with Spiridon he had deduced that somehow the witch Lily Evans' child was shifted to the daughter of Zeus, feeding power into the third runt."

"As to not alarm the goddess of war, he recommended to Spiridon that he remove the foreign fetus without delay before it caused irreparable damage to Athena and the remaining babies."

Harry suddenly heard whispers in the back of his mind again.

"The babe has a dangerous level of power." A deep voice was reporting. "If you allow the witch's child to dwell in your wife, its power could poison your other children, the womb, or worse — your wife!"

"But Spiridon did not accede."

Harry rolled his eyes, livid. "Surprise, surprise."

"He demanded the fetus remain where it was and when Diocletian threatened to inform the goddess and the world of wizards — "

"He purged his mind of the information. Diocletian was no longer a threat, and the third child was allowed to remain until its birth." Calchas ended.

Kaltagonus looked sick at the mention of another one of Spiridon's exploits. "So ... you're saying ... the runt, the third child, Lily Potter's thought-miscarried, all-powerful, potentially murderous child..." his voice rose with every word and his eyes were watery. "...Is really me?"

There was a considerable pause and Harry held his breath in anticipation of the confirmation.

Two worlds came crashing down with one simple answer. "Yes." Harry felt his stomach drop for what was possibly the fifth time that night.

When no question was forthcoming from the stunned Being, Odysseus picked up where Calchas had ended. "Had it not been for you, determined Kaltagonus, Golradir would have destroyed all the babes within Athene's womb to make room for himself."

The Being rolled his eyes. "Great. So even in the womb, I was a killer."

"When he stumbled upon your barely-living form, he moved to overtake you. He never, fortunately for us, intended to encounter the strong-willed soul in you, young warrior. He could not overthrow you, so he resorted to becoming a parasite, infusing both your bodies and souls into one, creating a strong, healthy child."

"You were so firm-minded, you unconsciously forced him into dormancy."

"But he is awakened again," Calchas gravely reminded. "And he seeks control once more."

The elder spirit paused as Kaltagonus remained silent, arms crossed and expression closed off. "It was much harder for Spiridon to draw attention from his transgression," he began as Kaltag's eyes darkened at the name. Harry himself bristled, righteously angered. "When Golradir made all the ordinary surrounding him extraordinary, forcing others to take notice."

Harry snorted. "Sounds like you, all right."

"Athene, however, was none the wiser," Penelope continued. "She only knew something was severely amiss."

"But Spiridon saw to it that her apprehension was fleeting."

"Until the birth."

Kaltagonus and Harry blinked. "The birth?"

Odysseus leaned back in his chair. "Your birth. You had full control over him in the goddess Athene's womb."

"But the night you were born, Golradir came into this world," Hector's deep voice rumbled. "The difficulty of birth strained the dormancy you had placed on him, and you unwittingly allowed him to overpower you to ensure your survival."

"For most of your infancy, he wielded control over your mind." Odysseus resumed. "Case in point. . . ."

The stream of colors swept both boys back into times' passed.

ooooo

(Olympos, the Chamber of Pallas Athene at O Oíkos Tōn Díos (The House of Zeus). Tuesday and Wednesday, July 31 – August 1, 1979. 10:57 PM.)

The violent gusts whipped Harry's hair and robes around him again before they abruptly stopped. Harry only managed to figure out he was in Spiridon and Athena's suite during nightfall before he heard a sharp gasp sound from behind him.

He spun around to find Athena, tensed and clutching her very swollen stomach. Harry watched as Kaltagonus rushed to her side before he appeared to realize he would be of no help in his nonexistent form.

Harry noticed she was not alone, but Spiridon (thankfully) wasn't present. Instead, a servant carefully knelt beside her bed as the Entity drew in another sharp breath and shook her head vehemently. "No, no, no," she softly chanted, her head bowed and eyes sealed shut, her hands protectively on her belly. "Something is amiss." She rubbed a spot that, Harry assumed, was just below her navel. "Why does my little one fidget so? What makes you restless, what troubles you so?"

"Your highness, I must..." the aide's stance radiated panic as she clasped the bedclothes and bit her lip. "It is time, your highness, please!"

"Why are you restless, my child?" Athena continued with her soothing, seemingly content on ignoring the servant. "Is it danger you sense?" Harry was startled as she nearly bent double with a gasp. Kaltagonus looked more panicked than he'd ever seen him, twisting his robes in his hands. "Something is happening." Athena finally addressed the woman.

Nodding in relief, the woman scrambled to her feet, making for the doors. "Then I shall summon the Eileithyiai and Queen Hera!"

"And the General and Mender Diocletian!" Athena managed to call out between her labored breathing. "Get my husband!"

As if someone had thrown the Impediment Jinx at her, the other woman slowed to a halt. She briefly paused at the door, before hesitantly facing the laboring mother-to-be. "But ... your highness, I — "

"What the hell are you waiting on, you bint?" Kaltag shouted. He groaned in frustration when he remembered he couldn't be seen nor heard.

The woman was looking at Athena in evident fear as she went on. "Your highness, as is custom, the High Being has — "

"Get my ... husband!" Harry flinched when she let out an unnatural wail of pain.

When the servant still stood at the doors, he swore he saw Kaltagonus' eyes burn orange. "But the High Being Zeus has requested that no one but — "

She instantly cut off as Athena's face turned severe, her dark eyes boring into the woman. Everyone in the room — apparent or otherwise — was instantly frightened. "Summon ... my ... husband." The pregnant Entity ordered with cold calculation.

Rather than risk the wrath of the goddess of War and Wisdom, the young woman promptly curtsied. "As you wish." She practically flew out the door.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before the doors swung open and in walked two identical women. The first held a torch that illuminated

the room, while the other glided in, palms pressed together and stoic-faced. Trailing them was the servant woman with what looked to be a bowl of sliced fruits. She set it aside and reverently addressed the twins before bowing to Athena and placing a fluffy pillow below a strange chair. "Mother Hera will arrive as soon as time permits."

Athena, her face glistening with a thin layer of sweat, jerkily nodded as she was being propped against the pillows by the other women. "And my husband?"

The servant's mouth pressed in a grim line before she nodded. "I have sent word, your highness. He should be along shortly." With an idle gesture, Athena dismissed the woman as she bit her lip and tensed.

One silent twin dabbed her forehead with a sponge while the other mounted the torch and drew the bed sheets down carefully. Harry thought they would endure this silence for quite a while, with Athena's sporadic grunts of discomfort. When the twin Entities finally did speak, he had to move closer to listen in. "Sister; daughter of Titaness Metis, mother of wise counsel..."

"This is a grave toil you have chosen."

"One not employed for several years."

"Athene, daughter wrought of Father Zeus' presentiment — "

"Though you are our father's favorite."

"Overseer of all things War and Wisdom — "

"Patron of Athens — "

"The task ahead of you is great." They maintained their low voices so well Harry and Kaltag had to stand on either side of one twin to hear them.

"For your erroneously-laid strength in the human spirit..." Harry thought he heard the pregnant Entity growl.

"...We permit thee guidance through the toils of labor."

"Bless you, sister." They simultaneously bent low to place kisses upon her sticky brow. "Come, allow us to clothe and set you proper." For the first time, Harry was glad he went unnoticed by everyone. Fortunately, no one could see the splotches of blush staining his cheeks as he hastily looked away. Kaltag made a noise of horror-struck surprise as he, too, turned from the women undressing Athena.

"Sodding hell, couldn't they have sent me after this was done?" he heard the Being gripe. "This is really disturbing."

"You're telling me..." Muttered Harry.

Several minutes passed before the doors burst open again. This time, Spiridon clanged in with Mender Diocletian. Harry felt a rush of hate flow through him; he had to restrain himself from acting rashly. It was no use, anyway, as he was in a memory. He vaguely noted the redhead going stiff as the militaristic Being neared them, his expression blank.

Harry briefly spotted Daedelus stationed outside the bedroom doors before they were sealed shut again. As the Eileithyiai murmured placating words, each at the Entity's shoulders, Spiridon strode directly to the birthing chair and seized his wife's extended hand tightly. The twins paused, startled by the sight of him, but quickly resumed their soft-speak.

"Curse you and your unwavering regard for the strength of humans!" His words held no malice, only fright which she seemed to detect. Nevertheless, she toiled to smile at him, and allowed him to sweetly kiss her.

"It is happening," she breathed, her face twisting in agony. "Much too soon, much too soon." She squeezed his hand as, what Harry assumed was another contraction passed. "Diocletian ... you — you said," she paused to clamp her jaw down to groan, "You assured us mid-August. It is not yet August, is it?"

Spiridon shook his dark head of hair, breathing deeply along with his wife. "Only moments before the seventh dies."

"Then why is my child so restless?" She again squeezed the spot below her navel. "Much too soon, it is much too soon!"

Her vocalizations went unchallenged as Diocletian looked up from his sharp blade and cruet of oil, his expression thoughtful as the twins continued to murmur. Without a response, the gray-haired physician knelt at the Entity's feet and raised the sheet, causing both young men to curse colorfully as they spun around quickly.

"Oh, dear God!" Bemoaned Kaltagonus. "I think I saw a head!"

"Ack! — Warn someone, will you?" Harry yelled at the man poking around beneath the sheet. The last thing he wanted to see was . . . .

He shuddered, squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head, steadily chanting a string of "bloody hells" under his breath. It was too disturbing to think about; he couldn't even say it. He didn't have to as Kaltag voiced his thoughts behind him.

"Motherf — argh! No, no, no! Bad image, bad, bad image..." If Harry weren't so nauseous, he would have found the Being's dilemma quite amusing. "I don't want to see me bursting out my mum! I'd rather see my bits hacked off with a blunt axe!" Well, Harry mused dryly, not my thoughts exactly, but close enough.

As the hour neared midnight, Athena's stifled groans became more vocal as the contractions drew closer and closer together. Spiridon's hands were redder than Harry's cheeks as his wife squashed them in her anguish. Even as Diocletian continued to duck his head under the duvet replacing bloodstained bandages (Harry was pleased to note the permanent green tinge to Kaltag's complexion), she repeated her mantra, "It is too soon; much too soon."

"You are in pain." Diocletian stated the obvious. "Shall I provide thee Dittany? Aristotle spoke fondly of its capability to ease the labor."

"Or take the life of both mother and child." The General objected. All eyes turned to the perspiring goddess.

"Only with your blessing, your highness."

Athena stiffly shook her head. "No. Absolutely no remedies that can harm our children." Spiridon firmly declared. With a slight wrinkle



creasing his brow, Diocletian paused, as if trying to remember something, but returned to his task and complied with Spiridon's wishes.

Just as Diocletian instructed her to prepare for the first push, the doors swung open with a flourish. A handful of women in servant's attire spilled into the room, quickly prostrating themselves on the ground. The young wizard distantly wondered if this was a custom done when royal Celestials were born, but his notions were quashed when another figure drifted into the room.

She walked with poised rigidity, her chin raised as she sneered down upon her line of worshippers. Her dark hair was overrun with silver, not simply expressing age, but speaking volumes of experience. Dark eyes commanded the room's full attention and nothing less, even if someone else was lying in the pangs of birth.

Immediately, everyone but Athena and the non-corporeal students had dropped to their knees, faces not daring to gaze upon the severe woman's countenance.

"All shall genuflect before Mother Hera, High Entity of Celestials and Men." The twins chorused.

The older Entity paused by the birthing stool, staring hard down her nose at the sandy-haired Entity, breathing through her clenched teeth. She surveyed the room with her cold regard, before allowing them to return to Athena. Harry could feel the thickness in the night air of the room, and he knew it wasn't from the pungent scent of herbs and fruit. Something told him that had Athena died in childbirth that night this woman would have been positively gleeful. It made him sick to his stomach.

"Your grace." Her chest heaving breath Athena dipped her head, moist with sweat and plastered with hair, to the elder Entity. "Queen Hera."

Hera eyed her as if she were the most objectionable thing she had ever had the misfortune of seeing. Harry inwardly chuckled, reminded strongly of Snape by that unpleasant look. "Athene." Her icy regal voice shattered the silence. She raised her hand — with some reluctance — and slowly pressed her lips to her fingertips.

Caressing Athena's distended abdomen and halfheartedly leaning forward to cup and kiss the damp temple, Hera declared, "Bless you, daughter; bless your labor." Her hand made a graceful sweeping movement back to the tautened flesh of her stomach. "I bless the birth of the future."

"Blessed — the birth of the future!" Everyone echoed.

At Athena's sharp intake of breath, the several women-servants scrambled from the room at Hera's bidding, save three. When the doors were shut, Diocletian, back under the cursed sheet, demanded that she push.

Hera looked quite uncomfortable — if not unnerved — at Athena's sudden outburst of agony. Spiridon laced their fingers together and whispered incoherently into her ear. The remaining aide of Hera unfolded one of the blankets Harry hadn't noticed, handing it to Diocletian when he gestured.

"I can see something, I cannot be sure."

"Well, it's not a lizard, that's for sure. . . . " Kaltagonus startled the messy-haired wizard as he violently broke into swears.

Diocletian's head, constantly bobbing under the bed sheet was beginning to make Harry's stomach lurch when finally, progress was made. "I can ... I can see ... my word!"

"What is it?" Spiridon called over Athena's howl. Rather than respond, Diocletian quickly removed his head from beneath the sheet and jostled a blanket under it instead.

"Your highness, you must push!" He looked somewhat crazed with his eyes magnified behind his glasses and his graying hair in disarray. "There is something extraordinary taking place!"

Harry vaguely heard the ashen prefect grumble something about perverts before he spotted something most abnormal.

Now, far be it for him to call himself an expert...

...But Harry had enough knowledge concerning childbirth to know that glittering lights were not supposed to be present down there. Even Hera, who stood a few lengths behind him, looked shocked.

"Oh, my..." Diocletian exclaimed in breathless anticipation. "Oh, my!"

The more Athena gasped and heaved, the brighter the glow became. It was as if the very sun was in the room and Athena was giving birth to it; in fact, it rivaled the sun's intensity. Harry had to shield his eyes to keep from falling blind. He distantly heard the commotion around him, the exclamations of surprise, the stint in chanting, and shocked cries from the Mender as the glow blazed brighter and brighter, illuminating the entire room in golden light. When the light was too bright to bear, a wave of power rippled through the room, knocking everyone to their feet. The room fell into an eerie calm.

"He is here."

A lone cry crowed through the silence.

The glare of golden light slowly died, and when it was safely dark again, Harry pulled his hands away from his eyes. He blinked at the immense contrast in light, spotting everyone scrambling to their feet before his attention was directed to Kaltag. He was about to ask if the boy was all right when he remembered he was invisible. But Kaltag probably would not have heard him anyway. For Harry noted the prefect's round eyes were fixed on an incredible sight.

Bawling in blood-spattered linens lay a much smaller version of himself, the last of the sparkling glow dying away. Thankfully, sometime during the enthralled gaping, the baby was cleaned, swaddled, and handed down to Spiridon. Carefully, Harry followed the Being to stare at his tiny form. Harry quietly smiled to himself as Kaltagonus audibly swallowed, staring at the wailing babe in wide-eyed wonder. Spiridon himself looked no better.

"Hello," murmured the thunderstruck General. "All is well young one, fear not. You are home now ... my son." Harry's fingers twitched in impatience to wrap around the man's neck.

When the agitated child at last stopped weeping, his wet eyes blinked open in curiosity. Harry was alarmed to feel an unknown fear

grip him as the infant Kaltag's irises glowed unnaturally golden yellow. All three observers froze.

"Holy..." Kaltag breathlessly whispered. Spiridon and Harry remained quiet, their eyes locked on that reproving, almost knowing stare.

Eventually, the newborn's fierce eyes softened, much to their relief, and faded into their familiar, albeit frightened azure. Harry still felt some uncertainty toward the child, even as Spiridon's rigid shoulders relaxed and he cradled the baby in awe. He somehow knew there was something in the child's mannerisms that reminded him oddly of the feeling of being watched very carefully.

The Gryffindor studied the child for a few moments longer before he jumped away from Athena, who was practically leaning through him. Tired and twitching, Harry watched as a drained smile spread across her face.

"My unforeseen, my beloved ... " she whispered. She sounded pained. Athena smiled as the newborn was reluctantly brought closer to her. "There is much power and wisdom in you already. And much impatience," she weakly laughed, gently stroking the pink cheek with a crooked finger. "For you were born at the last moment of the seventh month, in a radiance; a marvel reserved only for the truly blessed."

The awestruck crowd seemed to take the new mother's response as an explanation for the strange events, but that did not stop them from gaping. The Eileithyiai, who Harry thought the Hogwarts Express could crash through the room and they wouldn'tve flinched, stopped chanting. Diocletian rested his hands on the Entity's blanketed knees as he stared at the infant with wide eyes. Hera was stunned, staring at the male baby in arcane suspicion.

Athena's tender caresses abruptly ceased as she keened, clutching fistfuls of the sheets with a pinched expression. The Eileithyiai resumed their chanting as Spiridon protectively held the quiet infant away from the fuss. Harry noticed Diocletian was again under the sheet with clean bed linens.

A number of pained sighs and pants later, another child emerged, and this time quite normally. So normal, in fact, Harry had to turn his

head away quickly to staunch the flow of bile at the sight of birth matter. And so cried another child ("A girl!" Diocletian yelled), thrust immediately into the arms of an apathetic Hera after her post-birth rinse.

Athena only had a moment's rest before she arched off the chair and released a throaty groan. And just as quickly as the births had begun, they ended with the arrival of the last one ("The last, a boy!"), bloody and slick with bodily fluids, separate afterbirths quickly following, renewing Harry's urge to toss his lunch.

He proceeded by releasing a steady stream of swears over and over in succession; had Mrs. Weasley been there, Harry knew she would have cuffed him several times. The wizard moaned, wishing he had something to lean on or heave his guts in. Groaning and burying his face in his hands, Harry hoped he never had to see that again.

The squirming third born was hastily sponged down and gently placed in his mother's embrace. Athena grinned at the crying infant as one of the Eileithyiai mopped her brow. She impatiently shoved away the slices of lemon and melon they thrust under her nose and studied her swathed infant. From the expression of awe gracing her face, Harry could also read extreme fondness. "Beautiful." The Entity shakily grinned.

"Bless you, Mother Hera." Thanked Spiridon, bowing his head low over his new child. "For you have guided the safe passage of our blessings, of the future." Her face remained impassive.

At the sight of Hera's wrinkled nose, one aide moved to discard the bloody bandage-cloths and water. Harry noticed the queen nearly held Nikola at arm's length as she continued to kick her legs.

Diocletian handed in more soiled cloths and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Normal births are not nearly as messy as this one," he commented with a crooked smile. "Then again, I'm not used to Divergent methods." When no reply was forthcoming, he began checking over Athena, trying his best to not bat the Eileithyiai and matrons away.

The firstborn infant had calmed in Spiridon's embrace, his blue eyes already roaming over everything in his line of sight. Spiridon was

transfixed at the sight of the child, his eyes scrutinizing the infant's delicate features as if he were expecting to find an apparent fault.

"He has your nose," Harry turned to Athena, who was carefully examining Starbuck. "And your strong jaw."

The General smiled indulgently. "Then he will be very handsome." The wedded couple shared an amused chuckle as the doors opened and one aide was gone. In her place stepped Daedelus, looking decidedly uncomfortable in the midst of such an intimate setting. He bowed before Hera, eyes bulging as the regal Entity all but dropped the second-born infant into his arms and swept out of the room without so much as an excuse.

"Sir — your highness!" He hurriedly supported the wriggling body in his care. "I, I don't — it was not my intention — "

"Peace, Daedelus." Spiridon lazily ordered, his dark eyes still fixed on his firstborn. Obediently, the soldier silenced, studying his bundle in tentative curiosity.

At last, the Eileithyiai finished their soft prayers and cautiously helped Athena back into bed. They exited the same way they had arrived, with the second servant and Diocletian in tow. He turned just before he walked out, eyeing the Entity over his round spectacles. "Rest now, your highness. You may begin feeding after your respite." With a curt nod, he left and the doors slammed shut to leave the parents in peace.

"Oh ... my ... goodness." Harry spun to face the pallid redhead. He'd never seen him so unwell. "I can't believe ... I just saw me being born! This — this isn't normal! This is not ... " The prefect gruffly groaned, fisting his hair and crouching beside Spiridon's stool. "Please let this be a nightmare, please, just let this be a really effed up dream . . . ."

"Shock's just worn in, then? Well — never mind. You can't hear me . . . ." Harry rolled his eyes when he realized he was only talking to himself.

"Quickly, we must name them," Their attention was pulled back to the Entity, who resumed as if she hadn't been interrupted. "Should they meet the Ferryman for whatever reason, they shall not be

nameless on my account." Her look of resolve was not to be questioned.

Spiridon inclined his head. "As you wish, my lady."

"He radiates potential. And his eyes: they glitter like stars," The Cherub in her arms fidgeted, his small hands thrashing as he returned his mother's smile. "You shall be called Starbuck ... " Spiridon hummed his approval, his gaze finally drawn from his bundle of blankets. "And since your father desires you to have secondary human names: Starbuck Zeus."

The baby made a noise that could only be identified as disgust. Daedelus snickered, but was silenced at the General's black look. Kaltagonus finally came back to his senses with a scoff. "Spiridon, perhaps?" He offered.

Athena shook her head after a moment's contemplation. "We shall debate this tomorrow morn. Come, Daedelus. Bring our second to me." With trepidation, the young Being made the short trip around the bed, only sitting on its edge when Athena bade him do so. "And our delicate warrior."

The couple fawned. Nikola gurgled and exclaimed, her arms freeing themselves from her blanket. "Oh! I see much strength in her. She was born for attention, was she not?"

The dark-haired Being smiled, looking closely at his daughter. "She was."

Zeus' daughter kindly grinned. "Our Nikola. Nikola Metis?"

"Athena."

Athena graced her husband with a smile. "Nikola Athena." Nikola cooed and settled down as the three Celestials smiled at her. At last, their attentions were turned to the last bundle. "Oh," sighed Athena in wonder. Her voice drew the baby's soft blue eyes to her, his face disturbingly emotionless. "Another son: our firstborn. I ... I have no name for him." She sounded fairly ashamed. "Perhaps Alexander?"

"I like it." Daedelus weighed.

"Perhaps not." Athena shot her husband a look. "Indeed we do have a name for him." Spiridon replied, tenderly rocking the newborn. Athena, annoyance forgotten, looked startled at this announcement.

"Truly?"

"You do?" Piped Daedelus, immediately readying himself for the reprimand that never came.

"Yes." Spiridon answered, his attention firmly on his firstborn. "Kaltag."

Even confused, exhausted and covered with sweat, Athena acted her astonishment with grace. "I do not believe I am familiar with that name."

"No, you would not be." The elder Kaltag rolled his eyes at the faces the dark-eyed General was making at the unaffected infant. "It was not called 'Kaltag' when first we met."

Athena's eyes glinted in her uncertainty but gleamed with realization. She beamed, holding Starbuck close. "Our first meeting? The former battlegrounds where America now lies?" At Spiridon's nod, a slow smile spread across her face. "Kaltag." Breathed the new mother with practice. She tilted her head at the quiet baby. "Kaltagonus."

Her spouse's brow furrowed with puzzlement. The wizard vaguely heard the seventeen-year-old counterpart mutter quietly to himself.

"It will be a name that commands respect and authority, to go with his commanding spirit." She proudly clarified, tucking the blanket closer around Starbuck, and shifting Daedelus' arm. Her husband simply nodded, gawking at his firstborn with a silly grin. "And his secondary designation? It must be something radiant. Something to remind us of his distinctive birth. Apollo? Kaltagonus Zeus, perhaps?"

Spiridon made a face. "Absolutely not."

Though visibly fatigued, the Entity bristled. Her eyes turned cold and hard; her annoyance could be felt in the very air of the room so much that Starbuck and Nikola stirred. In one second, she became as fierce as legend portrayed her. "And why not? It is a show of



power, being named after Díos, the son of Kronos and the Sky Father."

"It is a show of insanity, placing such a burden on his shoulders already." The General countered. "Do you truly want our child living with high expectations, existing in his shadow for all eternity? For him to already have a reputation to uphold?"

The red haired student snorted. "There aren't enough women in the world to seduce to live up to that reputation . . . ."

"...To have a life not his own, when he is not yet an hour of age? Goodness knows I wouldn't," the elder Being muttered. Dual glares were turned to Daedelus when he snickered.

Athena's brown eyes glittered. "You would dishonor your king: my father?"

"I know you honor and cherish your father, as he does you; but think of our firstborn's life, my love. Let him have a chance to govern his own fortune, in his way." The woman stared at her husband skeptically, as if to assess the honesty behind his eyes. Before long, she nodded her acquiescence. They turned toward their respective armfuls, arguments put behind them as their faces brightened once more, despite the tense atmosphere.

Spiridon's admiring expression became thoughtful as he swayed the unfussy child. "If I may be so bold, your highness?" The Entity nodded at the Celestial captain holding her daughter.

"Remember: boldness has limits, soldier." The General teased, though his words conveyed an underlying threat.

"In my humble opinion, I have heard Daedelus to be a fine, strong name. Defended by many promising accounts of history."

The Entity's musical chuckle filled the room at Daedelus' jest. Spiridon smirked. "Hubris, Captain." His face again turned pensive as he mumbled to himself. "Something radiant, you say?" Athena absently studied her daughter but answered with a nod. "I am considering Severus as godfather, as well you know." He looked apologetically at Daedelus. The captain steadfastly avoided his gaze.

"I was hoping they wouldn't remember that." Kaltagonus muttered from nearby. Harry rolled his eyes.

Athena caught her husband's intent look. "I speak 'radiance' and you think ... 'Severus'?"

"My sentiments exactly." Kaltag griped.

"Hear, hear." Chimed Harry.

A frown marred the Entity's features. "He is so young and troubled."

Daedelus unkindly smirked. "Yes ... and his predilection for dark attire simply exudes vivacity, wouldn't you say?" He cooed to fidgety Nikola. Spiridon glowered as his wife weakly chuckled.

"Not Severus, his middle name. Brilliance. Luminosity."

Athena's brow creased. "Kaltagonus ... Luzio?"

"Lucien." Corrected Spiridon. At his wife's reluctance, he continued, "Severus' ancestry is impressive; he directly descends from the powerful wizard line of the Roman Emperor Lucius Septimus Severus himself. He is of fine blood; I would not befoul the heir's eminence by naming him after commoners, your highness."

The faint lines around the woman's eyes tightened at the curt tone her husband used at her title. Nevertheless, she dismissed it and the Entity of Wisdom paused, finally signaling her approval. "Our blessed bundle of brilliance, you shall be called Kaltagonus Lucien."

"And thus spake the words that ruined my life." Groaned the elder Kaltagonus.

Gingerly leaning, Athena kissed the foreheads of all three children, as did Spiridon, and the matron placed the children in nearby bassinets with Daedelus' assistance. Spiridon was reluctant to part with his silent Cherub, frowning when his arms were emptied.

"I shall take my leave, then." Daedelus, backed toward the doors. "They will begin bonding soon and I'd best not be around for that. I shall oversee the completion of the new Cherubs' suite across the hall. Am I to assume that all your belongings are soon to follow?"

Spiridon tore his eyes away from the trio of bassinets to nod once. "Our personal effects will briefly be transferred after the first week has ended, Captain. Every last moment of our time is to be spent with them until their presentation. Are you prepared to adopt my duties until the new moon?"

Daedelus nodded. "I am, General. 'Tis a supreme honor to stand proxy for you, sir."

"Brownnoser." Kaltagonus snickered with a smirk.

"Cease the sycophancy, Daedelus. It is quite off-putting."

The younger soldier blushed, bowing slightly. "As you wish, your highness. Shall I have the wreaths prepared?"

"That would be fine, Captain Diomedes."

Daedelus tipped his head to the fatigued blonde woman. "Esteemed Entity Nike would like to visit with you soon, your highness. She expressed her blessing for a safe delivery and has a desire to meet with my lady whether the children are present or not. She understands the magnitude of bonding."

"Send word to her immediately; I shall be in good health for conference in four suns' time."

"Straight away, your highness." He quickly glanced at the bassinets. "And shall I inform the boulê and full kingdom?"

Both husband and wife exchanged a look. "Ah, his majesty's Cabinet and his majesty, for now. Should the servants keep to their confidence, the High Being and Cabinet shall see fit when to notify the people. For now, thank you, Daedelus. You are dismissed."

The young soldier nodded. "Yes, sir. And congratulations your highness, General." With a sweeping bow he left the room.

As Spiridon and the matron assisted Athena for several moments, Harry began to think. They had seen the birth; it was just as Hector described it, and it was over. But why were they still here?

He was broken from his thoughts as Kaltagonus made a startled noise. Harry exhaled in irritation and turned to see what had caused his reaction now when his own eyes widened.

Long, smoky tendrils were slithering through the air from the babies' baskets. The wisps curled over the edge, merging along their slow path to the bed. Harry could only watch as Kaltag ran toward the bassinets and the alert adults tended to the exhausted Entity, entirely unaware.

Kaltagonus futilely began fanning away the smoke, to no avail. "Damn it, why aren't they seeing this?"

It wasn't until the smoky threads began weaving their way around the matron and General and ghosted over the slumbering woman's body, that Spiridon's notice was caught. The Celestial's face tautened in panic, eyeing his wife for any discomfort.

"Wha...? Doula? Doula, what's happening?"

The attendant paused from folding the linens, all but gaping at the stern General. A look of surprise graced her features as if she was shocked to speak in the presence of such greatness. At Spiridon's furrowed brow the matron lowered her eyes and watched the smoke's progress.

"They are identifying who their mother is." She curtsied reverently to the sleeping Entity. "It does not harm them. Cherubs act on this after they have left the safety of the mother's arms subsequent to release from the womb." Spiridon did not look convinced. "It is a form of security for them, knowing their mother is nearby and can be easily found."

Frowning, the General doubtfully eyed the light mist swirling over Athena's sleeping form. "It often ceases after three suns, or shortly after the first nursing." The General nodded, absently twirling his finger in the gray clouds.

"And the father's?"

The matron contritely smiled, wringing the coverlet in her grip as if she expected to be killed on the spot if he didn't like the answer. "Cherubs do not identify their fathers, sir." She slackened when he

curtly accepted the explanation, relieved to get back to her responsibilities.

Rubbing his face in his hands, Spiridon wearily grunted, tiredly smiling at his wife before unfastening his sword and sheath, laying it down to unravel the sheet-like garment worn by the Celestials. The two boys released matching groans. "Eugh, not again!" The elder griped, vigorously rubbing at his eyes.

But Spiridon had stopped his progress to stare at the three identical cradles a good distance from his bed. The awestruck expression found its way back to his face and with quiet steps, he headed for the first bassinet. Harry ambled closely behind, curious to get a closer look at the infants.

By the dark blanket haphazardly draped about the infant, he would have guessed the babe to be Starbuck by default. Harry studied the small infant, warily eyeing the smoke that seemed to puff furiously from the boy's tiny palm. He could already see the smattering of wispy blond hair atop his head. Spiridon traced the small cheek with a finger before leaning over the next smoky bassinet.

This one was Nikola, Harry could automatically tell. If the coral-colored blanket wasn't a dead giveaway, Harry didn't know what was. She softly whined as her father came into view, and Harry noted she looked exactly like her younger brother, save for a thicker head of hair. They were very active for having only been born thirty minutes ago.

"Hm." The beaming red-haired prefect, happily looming over the last cradle, disrupted Harry's inspection. "Fifteen minutes old and I'm simply adorable. I'm so hot, I'm jealous." Harry refrained from making a pointless comment as Spiridon adjusted his writhing daughter's blankets. The attention seemed to excite her, causing excited clouds of smoke to burst out her hand. With one last smile, he advanced toward the last bassinet with a broad grin.

His grin was effectively wiped off his face when a hard translucent casing sprang up around the cradle, successfully blocking the infant from all contact. Startled, Spiridon jerked back, hesitantly reaching out to touch the barrier. When his hand was centimeters away, the ward crackled in warning, rippling with red sparks. Spiridon snapped his hand back, his eyes wildly sweeping the room for something.

"Doula!" He urgently whispered, taking a step back from the bassinet. "Matron, I bid you come!"

The matron abandoned dragging the drapes, passing through Harry in her haste to please. "Yes, sir?"

The dark-eyed Being gestured to the last crib. "Are those defensive shields?" She eyed him frightfully, nodding after a beat. "Why?" Kaltag leaned closer as she addressed the General in a quiet voice.

"After the birth ... if the babe has not Felt its mother, their defensive shields are brought about."

And suddenly, with that simple statement, Harry was struck with a startling realization. He now understood why the Quintessence wanted them to see this memory. His wide verdant eyes drifted toward the only cradle with a flickering armor of magic.

That was his mother's child.

That was his mum and dad's son.

That ... was his brother.

And with a swiftness that worried even him, his disgust with Spiridon grew. He balled his hands into fists, desperately wishing he were visible and corporeal. If only to swing and hit Spiridon with a satisfying blow, he wanted that small victory if just for that moment. Across the arc of people reminiscent and present-day, Harry could almost see the words click in the prefect's mind. His large eyes stared back and forth between the fortified cradle and the General.

"The protection arises when an unfamiliar person or beast approaches the Cherub's present resting place. Only those familiar to their senses — attendants, Menders and parents — will be allowed touch. All else is rejected. This method lasts for but a full moon cycle; thereafter can they be properly acquainted to the social order."

Spiridon narrowed his eyes slightly at the glinting safeguard. "And if the shield should surface after distinguishing the parents?"

"It is an issue of trust, sir." She slightly withdrew as he turned on her with alarming speed.

"Trust?" He barked.

The matron lowered her gaze, stooping respectfully. "Of the natural world, General." She cautiously resumed her stance and stared at the assembly of cradles rather than Spiridon's dark gaze. "It is rare, but not unheard of. Cherubs that have left the womb are at times distrustful of the new world; disallowing any touch after they have been laid to rest."

"Why was I not advised of this beforehand?"

Ruefully, the woman dropped her gaze. "It is a frightful experience, leaving the only sanctuary one has ever known. Even after bonding with the mother, some babes remain reluctant. I would not fret, General."

"You have nothing to fret over, Matron." Rudely snapped the dark haired Being, glowering when the shield's intensity brightened as he took a step forward.

"You are right, General. But I know the firstborn prince will forfeit by and by."

Spiridon's insecurity showed through his irritated tone. "In addition to midwifery and servitude you are a Soothsayer?"

The frightened matron knit her fingers in her lap and shook her head. "No, sir. I mean no impudence, as I am woman; but I am confident he shall concede earlier than three suns. The call of hunger will go unsatisfied for but a moment. By and by he will submit and learn to trust his surroundings, and in doing so ... you."

Spiridon's face darkened in the wavering torchlight. Sharp eyes made the matron turn away submissively. "You speak boldly, Matron. Were my wife not seduced by Hypnos, I would permit her to contend with your brashness, however little you have exhibited." The attendant had a look of terror on her face that only made Harry's fury bubble over.

"However, I have no desire to risk the Lady Athene's wrath after such a night as this. As you have assisted my knowledge at present, I shall overlook this incident. But be wary in the future, woman; for I will not be as merciful in the company of others."

The attendant dropped to the floor, her back nearly bent double as she pleaded her gratitude. The General briskly waved her back to her tasks and stood a distance from the cradles, listening to the soft noises from the first two baskets.

He only glanced at the last crib before sighing sharply and striding toward the back of the room. Spiridon paused, tensing in the doorway before slowly looking back at his children. Harry almost thought he spied a hopeful gleam in his eyes as they drifted over the cradles.

With a dejected glance at the now unshielded bassinet, Spiridon disappeared into another room.

In a fierce squall, Harry felt the familiar sensation of finally being pulled out of the memory.

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(Mount Olympos, the Courtyard at O Oíkos Tōn Díos (The House of Zeus). Saturday, September 29, 1979. 11:56 AM.)

Harry hadn't expected to be transferred to a colorful room, with colorfully dressed people and walls covered in frescos and mosaics fixed underfoot and around the room. It was breezy and sunny and chatty, with everyone talking to someone. Guards were dotted around the room, their armor at its shiniest and their weapons held with cautious ease.

Harry could easily tell they were no longer in the wizarding world.

Besides everyone wearing a dress — or those bed sheet things, what did they call them ... chitons, he thought — he was conscious of the fact most everyone present was an adult.

Though he did recognize a handful of people. In the far back, wearing robes so out of place in deep mauve with gold and silver



suns, moons and stars stood a somewhat younger Dumbledore. The twinkle was present in his eyes and he smiled kindly at Headmaster Chiron, shaking his hand and starting up a conversation Harry was too far to hear.

In the far corner of the room stood Hermes — Icarus' father — in brightly colored robes, talking quietly with a hard-faced man. Beside him sat a dark-skinned woman that could only be his wife; she was cradling a small infant as well, which Harry guessed was Icarus.

The conversations in the room were too random or boring to stop and listen to, with topics ranging from Zeus' heir to stories of travel to the latest Olympian gossip (Harry rolled his eyes at this). More people poured in from the entry, and with them brought quite an unexpected surprise: Lily and James Potter.

Harry noted the red-haired Being — who had kept his distance from the room at large — stood erect and made his way through the illusion of Celestials and carefully followed the pair.

The wizard was glad to note his parents looking rather fit and happy, especially his mother. She still appeared somewhat haunted, but at least she'd gained some color to her cheeks. It barely escaped his notice that they resembled nothing like ordinary wizards: they had indeed dressed for the occasion. And by the dark expression on James' face, he was not at all pleased with that decision.

His father pulled at the broach on his left shoulder and tugged the sleeve down. "Why couldn't we have worn robes?" He hissed, yanking at his collar now. "Better than wearing a bloody dress."

"It — is — not — a — dress." Lily reproved, slapping his hands away. "Really, have you no class? We're at an official presentation to the Celestial court; we must dress for the occasion."

James snorted, motioning to the back of the room. "Yes, well, someone obviously failed to mention that to Dumbledore." Lily smiled behind her palm as the elderly wizard tipped his pointed hat to them. "Why does he get to wear whatever he wants?"

"Because he's Dumbledore," Lily dryly reasoned. "You try telling him to dress appropriately for an event; he'd probably come purposely

clad worse than your great aunt Cassiopeia at our wedding, and that's saying something."

James grimaced in response, as if remembering something particularly unpleasant. "I see your point, then."

"It really was thoughtful of Athena to send us these as wedding gifts. The most appropriate garment I own for this event is what I wore at our wedding." James gestured to a bench in the very back and allowed Lily to sit first. "I wouldn't want to give them further motive to stare at us."

"What? Stare at us? They're not — oh," James eyed the many people studying them around the room with a slight frown. "They are staring. Are we that obvious?"

"No, darling: Dumbledore's obvious," she smirked, stifling a laugh. "We're just ... apparent, since we've really no place to put our wands," she gestured to the carved piece of wood jutting from a makeshift belt round her hips.

"Well next time, I don't care what the occasion is: we wear robes. If Dumbledore can, so can we." Lily frowned at James' obstinacy, shaking her head as he tugged at his chiton once more.

A lot more people flowed into the court, and with them came a sight Harry never expected to see. In robes of stark black strode a young Severus Snape, dark eyes glittering with disinclination and mouth set in a firm line.

"Oh, leave it out!" James' distraught voice rang out. Several eyes drifted to their location as Lily held James' arm in warning. "Snivellus? What's he doing here?" He scoffed, his eyes shooting daggers at the scowling wizard. Snape simply furrowed his brow and made his way to the front of the room, sitting on one of benches across what appeared to be an altar.

"Excuse me," an official looking, gray-bearded Being interjected before James could start complaining. "But these benches are reserved for Cabinet members only."

Lily made a startled noise before standing and pulling James up by his arm. "Sorry." The Being inclined his head and motioned for a line of bearded, adorned men to take their seats.

"Hey, why does Snivellus get to sit, then?" the miffed wizard griped. "He's not a Celestial; he should be the first to be thrown out."

"James ... " Lily began in that warning tone.

"No, I want to know why Snape gets to sit in the front!" His voice rose just enough to attract the attention of those around them. Harry chuckled: they looked positively scandalized.

Lily was effectively cut off from scolding him as a voice boomed through the yard, shouting out sharp words in ancient Greek. The bodies that filled the room parted at the command, "Make way for the Dodekatheon!"

Harry watched in mild fascination as the rest of the court, enraptured by the sight of twelve silhouettes looming closer and closer to the plainly adorned altar in the front. As the faces came into view, Harry was absolutely sure he had never seen these people before: they were completely unrecognizable and normally, he could barely venture a guess as to who they were. But most unexpectedly, he felt a rush of knowledge pass through him. And deep down, though Harry never laid eyes on these people, he suddenly knew them.

Leading the first set on the right was Poseidon, complete with his long sea-tangled hair and beard, white like the foam of the sea, his mottled skin and pronged trident. Demeter was next; with the severe, if not troubled, look dominating her features, Harry could easily tell it was getting close to winter. "Persephone," Harry mumbled, barely aware the name had passed his lips.

Afterward strode a young, earthy-looking woman, a crescent diadem arching over her dirt-colored hair, holding fast to a quiver of arrows: Artemis. Had the pale woman not passed before, Harry would not have seen the striking resemblance she bore to the next lyre-wielding Celestial. A beardless, golden-skinned Apollo flashed a calm smile over the crowd, a golden crown of laurel circling his head and his skin wet with perspiration from filling in for Helios, probably.

There was a slight gap between Apollo and the next Celestial. Harry frowned at the limping man, his skin as bronze as Apollo's, yet not nearly as flawless. Healed burns were peppered over his visible skin, and he also had a very weighty-looking hammer carried over his shoulder. With a stiff lip, Hephaistos hobbled in, unaware of the look of disdain he received from his brother behind him.

Clad in his brazen armor, the war-worn Ares strode in, staring at the gathered crowd as if he'd rather be out causing mischief and bloodshed than walking in the procession. Which, Harry somewhat comically mused, he probably did. The scantily clad Entity starting the next line had to be Circe's mother; Harry could feel the tingle of Aphrodite's seductive pull tugging at him even in non-corporeal form.

Several of the men on the rows lining the procession cleared their throats and smoothed their garments hastily as she passed, smiling in mock-innocence as the red silk slid off her shoulder. Many growled in approval when she didn't correct it. Winged-helmet and caduceus-wielding Hermes marched in then, greeting the assembly with his mischievous grin. Dionysus sauntered after, goblet full of dark liquid in one hand and his famed thrysus in the other. He slapped the slight paunch under his chiton and chuckled amorously, much to the chagrin of the Entity behind him.

Harry easily recognized the last Entity as Hera, her face as stony and distant as he last remembered. Behind her glided in Athena, who returned Lily's eager smile. And last, but never least (especially to an Olympian), the king of the gods himself strut in, the great Zeus, glowing in gold cloth. Harry didn't know what he had expected to see, but from his standpoint, Zeus looked rather burly, and though he had thousands of years on Dumbledore, he looked considerably much younger.

His hair and beard were a sea of flaxen ringlets sprinkled with white, and his head was complete with a gold circlet of ivy about his head. His robes looked more majestic than anyone else's in the room, and he had more than likely seen to that. Though he looked quite mature, he appeared to have many more centuries of fight to him. Zeus looked every bit the grandfatherly type. Except his eyes: where Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with good humor and something more, the High Being's gaze was more calculated, and Harry would venture to guess, devious.

A wave of reverence swept through the room as everyone bowed or curtsied in respect. From the many lowered stances, Harry was able to easily locate Kaltagonus, who was standing near Spiridon and Daedelus, both next to Snape. Rather than pointlessly duck and swing and crawl around the people, Harry walked straight through them; it wasn't like they'd feel anything, right?

He made it near the redhead's area just as their whispered conversation ended and the Twelve Olympians made it to the front seats and sat down with flourish. When Zeus was positioned behind the altar-like setting, he motioned for all to rise to their normal posture. Hera seated herself on an elaborate throne behind him, her eyes ever cold and calculating.

"The harvest has been a bountiful one, blessed with the crops of life," Zeus' silky voice boomed as he gestured to Hephaistos. Sometime between the march and the sit, someone had placed an infant with a mess of black hair on his head with the man. Upon close inspection and that bewildering well of knowledge, Harry knew it was Xenik. "Several babies fill the bellies of my children, and my children's wives and lovers. I am truly blessed with a magnificent feast of progeny, both great and grand."

A smattering of applause echoed around the room, causing Kaltagonus to roll his eyes. "Feast of progeny? Why doesn't he just call us what we are to him: future bed-warmers." With a snort, Harry could tell this was going to take long. He crouched to sit beside Daedelus, only realizing too late that it was impossible.

He bounced slightly off the memory floor, causing an unpleasant rattle to course through his body, disorienting him for a bit. When he stood to his feet, the jangling effect ceased, but not without leaving him with the feeling of warped insides.

"Remind me to never try that again." As always, he went unanswered.

"...This day has been written in the skies, the seas, and the very sands of our time. A presentation most unforeseen, but sincerely received." Zeus' sharp gaze darted in Spiridon's direction (who clenched his fists) and finally rested on Athena with a smile. "Without further ado, I receive the midwives into the holy court."

A low buzz of murmurs filled the room as the crowd reacted to the appearance of three heavily clothed women. In each of their arms was cradled a child, not more than two months, wrapped in nothing else but the softest of cloths. Though they were still young, Harry instantly recognized them.

Starbuck had wispy tendrils of blond hair and was drooling all over his fingers, staring at the merrily fussing crowd with wide curious brown eyes. Nikola, of course, squealed loudly, and strongly resembled Starbuck. To her immense delight, the crowd laughed and swooned at her antics; though Harry thought he saw the members of the Cabinet frown at this. Last was Kaltagonus, covered from head to toe in a blanket; the only part of him not covered was his face, which held an inquisitive expression as his blue eyes scanned the crowd. Even Harry knew this behavior was unbecoming of a baby.

"I've never seen a more observant babe," a woman near them whispered. Harry caught Kaltag's narrow-eyed expression before he searched for his parents' reaction. James looked very curious, craning his neck for a proper look. Lily, on the other hand, looked somewhat bereft. James paused his snooping a moment later and gazed upon his wife, whispering something Harry was too far to hear. With a brief smile and a shake of her head, it seemed the matter was dropped; James nodded, but kept a careful eye on the witch anyway.

"Hm, blankets," the redheaded Celestial muttered. "No wonder I like sleeping naked."

"Ew — gross," Harry griped, making a face. "Too much, mate; too much." He shook his head and stepped back from the Being's presence.

The midwives made it to the front, lowering themselves to the floor to revere the High Being. Harry thought he saw the Celestial's eyes glitter openly with lust and a dangerous smile swept over his face. With one swift motion, the women were back to their feet, eyes lowered respectfully.

As the Celestials and guests of honor were made to sit, Harry noticed Spiridon slightly lean over to his second. "Kaltagonus looks troubled, does he not?"

The redhead blinked. "I do?"

The captain gracefully shrugged. "He does not look any different to me. It is hard to find a Cherub that rarely smiles." With a frown, Spiridon sat straight and smiled when Athena caught his eye.

Young Snape's eyes slid to Spiridon and his features expressed — dare it be true — concern. "He rarely smiles, you say? That can't be normal."

"Silence," Daedelus hissed from around Spiridon. "The High Being is speaking." With a scowl he straightened in his seat, ignoring Snape's (and Spiridon's) glare. Elder Kaltagonus chuckled in amusement, shaking his head. Harry vaguely wondered why the two did not get along. Not that anyone could get along with Snape.

"...Their unconventional methods of rearing their children; ones I am not likely to understand as time passes." A light chuckle filled the room, gaining a small frown from Spiridon. "Nevertheless, they shall be reared by their lady mother," he beamed at Athena and sent a pointed, barely tolerant look in Spiridon's direction. "And lord father. Let the presentation to the divine court commence. Bring forth the third-born."

The midwife holding Starbuck stepped forward, kneeling as she raised the child heavenward. Zeus gathered the infant in his arms and turned him to face the crowd. "Starbuck Spirideus ... such vast potential; you are headstrong, a consequence from the combined bloods coursing through your body. I bless and acknowledge you as the son spawned of noble-blooded Athene. Hail!"

And the crowd responded with, "Hail Starbuck Spirideus, son of Athene of mighty Zeus!"

"Bless him, my children." At this request, several of the twelve Olympians rose and kissed the infant Starbuck on his forehead, whispering quiet blessings (Dionysus even gave the infant a sip of wine from his cup) and returning to their seats. Hera sat still in her throne, glaring at each of the triplets equally.

When Starbuck was handed back to the midwife, Zeus commanded, "Bring forth the second-born."

Nikola smiled widely as she was placed in Zeus' arms, and drew a chuckle from the man and the crowd, grabbing a fistful of the white-gold ringlets. "A strong girl-child, Nikola Athena."

"Goodness, even then she got all the attention." Grumbled Kaltag.

"Strength, I see, and a doggedness found only in men is exuded from your very being; yet you will be a delicate beauty that balms even the most tempestuous of seas." Zeus presented the beaming two-month-old to the court. "I bless and acknowledge you as the girl-child spawned of noble-blooded Athene. Hail!"

"Hail Nikola Athena, girl-child of Athene of mighty Zeus!" The High Being beckoned the Celestials to bless Nikola, and she was quickly given to the midwife.

Harry narrowed his eyes as the High Being's eyes gleamed with something unreadable — and dangerous — when they found the last infant. "Bring forth the firstborn."

A low buzzing spread through the assembly as the midwife genuflected and offered the quiet infant to the Celestial king. Only when he reached the Being's grasp did the young Kaltagonus react, making a small noise of uncertainty. Zeus lingered with the bundle in his arms, smiling at him almost wistfully.

"Kaltagonus Lucien," he seemed to test the name with his own tongue, stretching it out carefully. "Firstborn ... such power; you will be greatness and beauty in all of its forms. Men and women shall fall to their knees before you in fear and awe. For now I caution all who wish ill against you." Zeus raised his head to level a glare at the throng, but Harry noted his eyes lingered on the spot he and the elder Kaltagonus were standing. "Let all the worlds come to know the blood that flows through your being."

The wicked glimmer in his eyes never faltered as a smirk tugged at his lips. Zeus fixed his stare on the silent child. "I bless and acknowledge you, Kaltagonus Lucien ... " his gaze flicked to Spiridon momentarily, " ... Kataibates."



Within seconds, the room burst loudly in excited conversation. Gasps and other cries of surprise were made as Celestials around the room exclaimed, "He has chosen! He has chosen an heir!"

"Praise the Crowned Athene! Praise Zeus!"

"Hail Prince Kaltagonus!"

"Spill the wine and make merry!"

"Mighty Athene is Heir and her firstborn, the throne-taker!"

Everyone was very pleased; even the stony-faced Cabinet in the rear seemed to nod their approval.

On the other hand, Hera looked murderous gripping the arms of her throne so tightly her knuckles were white. She stared at the young Kaltagonus with such hatred Harry blinked, confused about her reaction. What exactly did that word mean? And why did she look ready to level the room flat with a Killing Curse?

Athena looked astonished; it was clear she had no idea of her father's intentions. Her eyes sought out the general, giving him a placating smile before moving to congratulate the infant.

Zeus raised the babe in the air. "Hail Kaltagonus! Pai'díos!"

"Hail Kaltagonus, the heir! O pai'díos!"

Zeus held the covered infant aloft, and the crowd gathered around them, praising them and topping their cups with wine; where the wine and brass goblets came from, Harry had no clue. He instead watched a series of emotions sweep over Kaltagonus' face, the most frequent being bewilderment. "That doesn't make sense. If I'm his heir, then why is everyone going spare back in the present?"

His blue eyes moved about the room, finally landing on his father nearby. Harry followed his line of sight and noticed Spiridon did not look as pleased as everyone else did, his wife included. Harry bent forward to hear his heated words.

"Hot-blooded Zeus," he spat lowly, though everyone else was too excited to hear him. "You thief! How dare he provoke me, claim my

child as his son? I have not offended him; he has no right." Spiridon glared daggers at the beaming elder.

Harry felt a grim satisfaction at the General's anger. "You deserve it, you bastard," he coldly hissed.

"He is the High Being," Daedelus drawled, eyeing the gathered swarm. "He can do whatever he pleases."

"But to claim my firstborn as his own? Without my consultation? It is treachery! How dare he take what is not his!"

Both Harry and Kaltag balked. "Oh, you're one to talk." Kaltagonus snapped scandalously, his eyes immediately widening at his own words.

Daedelus turned to the livid General, raising a thick brow. "If you contest the claim, take your dispute to Zeus." He gave an affected smile that was scowled at. "I am sure he will be ever merciful ... and have you killed swiftly."

Spiridon quietly bristled. At his side, Snape, who appeared hesitant to intrude, stood to his full height, keeping an eye on the proceedings. "He is king, Spiridon. His word is final; his word is law." He ignored the black look Daedelus gave him.

"Yes, but that does not mean I have to like it."

"You don't." He pointed out.

"Obviously." Daedelus hissed from Spiridon's other side. Both wizard and captain glared at each other before turning away.

It was apparent the ceremony was over as Zeus all but paraded around the room with the infant Kaltagonus, who regarded everyone with mild curiosity. Harry vaguely noted Hera had all but stormed out of the court, her maids at her heels. At long last, the infant was handed to Athena, who bowed to her father and made her way toward them. She stopped briefly to speak with Hephaistos, commenting him and bending to kiss Xenik on his forehead. Harry snorted as the larger Xenik stared at Kaltag with wide, inquisitive eyes, finally reaching his tiny hand out for a better examination.

"God, get him away from me. I can't be infected at such an impressionable age," the elder Being sniffed, crossing his arms and glaring at his miniature adversary.

Athena did move out of reach, motioning for the midwives to follow with the remaining triplets. Daedelus immediately bowed, as did Snape, and Daedelus murmured, "Your highness, o pai'díos," to both mother and child respectively. This earned him a nasty look from Spiridon. Seeing the look on the man's face, Athena approached her scowling husband with a put upon smile. "What troubles you, my lord husband?"

Harry watched in fascination as an assortment of expressions passed over the General's face, finally settling on irritation. "What evil passes your father's mind now?"

"Oh, you want to talk about evil?" Harry incredulously said.

Athena's expression darkened and she pulled the heavily swathed Cherub closer to her bosom. Daedelus and Snape and the midwives wisely retreated for their privacy. "You speak ill of the Thunder King for being noble? Can you not see he gifts us with a blessing second only to love?"

"By stealing our firstborn? Naming my boy to be his? I will not allow it." Hissed Spiridon through clenched teeth.

"We will not make our case among this throng, this — this time of merrymaking," she emphasized. "The Court has demanded for celebration. I intend to acknowledge the demand." With a hard stare that brooked no room for argument, she smiled calmly to welcome the tentative approach of Harry's parents. Dumbledore seemed to be in animated discussion with the Cabinet members. "Lily, James. It pleases me to see you in high spirits."

The Potters smiled, a tinge of pink staining Lily's cheeks. "We couldn't wait to see the children. They're beautiful." She studied each of them carefully with a longing smile.

"Yes. I myself am glad to have finally left our chambers for more than mere minutes." Athena musically replied, glaring at Spiridon for adjusting the cloth around Kaltagonus. "Oh, but I am being selfish; would you like to hold him?"

Harry wistfully smiled as his mother's eyes lit up in anticipation. "I —"

"Actually, I promised Severus he could hold Kaltagonus first," Spiridon smoothly interrupted. Harry glowered at him. Surprise briefly flitted across Snape's face before it became unreadable. "He is, after all, his godfather." Spiridon easily snatched the two-month-old from his wife's arms and deposited him gently in the young wizard's arms. Harry thought he saw a brief moment of panic flash across the man's eyes before he eyed the child in his embrace.

"What? Why does Snively get to hold him first?" Harry heard his father mutter. A muffled groan followed soon after, and he looked up to see James rubbing his ribs and glaring at his wife.

The elder Kaltagonus turned almost white at the sight of his infant self in the snarky potion master's arms. But the child didn't seem to mind; in fact, Harry thought he looked quite relaxed with the darker man (perish the thought!) and even began a fascination with the shiny brooch on the man's robes. Spiridon fiddled with the cover over the Cherub's head while eyeing Lily and James furtively.

Athena gave Lily and apologetic glance. "That is fine; we will be going to the Potters' home soon in a short while." Spiridon looked as if he had swallowed one of Snape's potions.

"Excuse me?"

Athena speared the general with a look. "Lily has invited us for tea and fellowship, and I've agreed to bring the children. They have not seen them for two months."

"They're seeing them now."

"Lily is his godmother."

"Not officially."

"General — "

"Ba," came the burble from Snape's arms. Everyone paused, their angry outbursts to stare at the young Being, smiling toothlessly as he watched the proceedings, holding fast to Snape's button.

"He's smiling," Spiridon needlessly pointed out. "He ... he never smiles."

"What?" James scoffed, shaking his head. "That's impossible. I'm sure he's smiled before. All babies smile ... unless they're being treated particularly horribly."

"The air is tight with predicament," a baritone voice broke the uncomfortable silence. Zeus smiled tightly at the group, his eyes regarding all the wizards with disdain. Harry immediately did not like him as he leered at Lily, who blandly returned his smile and looked away. "I do not believe I have had the pleasure?"

Kaltagonus scoffed. "Shocker: someone you haven't shagged. Yet." Harry shot a glare at the redhead.

"Father, this is Lily and James Potter. I have told you about them."

Zeus nodded his large head. "Yes, but Athene made no mention of your beauty." James grinned proudly, throwing an arm around Lily's shoulders. "However, I offer my condolences," he held Lily's delicate hand in his and put on a regretful expression.

"On our marriage?" James inquired, staring at the man in a mixture of awe and disbelief.

"Ah, yes," Zeus replied somewhat wincingly. "That, as well." Harry laughed as his mother took that time to pull her hand free, discreetly wiping it on her robes.

"I have also named Lily to be Kaltagonus' godmother."

"As I have Severus." Spiridon indicated to the wizard. Snape seemed to have shrunk back at the appearance of the High Being, cradling the Cherub close. Zeus sized him up in his gaze and issued a tight smile.

Athena motioned for Snape to give her the baby. "I was simply telling Spiridon that the children hold the court's attention now; we shall adjourn to the Potters for tea afterward."

"I do hope the invitation is open for one more?" Zeus inferred, pulling the child into his arms again.

Lily's eyes widened while James unhelpfully gaped. "Well ... " Lily began.

"Father, as much as the Potters would appreciate your company, I daresay your presence will be needed among the Elders of the Cabinet." Athena raised her brow significantly, glancing at the stoic baby in his embrace.

"Aha," he rumbled with laughter, nodding to Starbuck and cradling Kaltagonus. "You are correct. I must speak with them urgently about establishing new decrees for my grandsons."

"Why is that, your majesty?" Daedelus boldly inquired.

Zeus laughed while gazing at Kaltagonus. "It seems some of the Spartans are counting the suns until our future ephebes become suitable erômenoi."

"The hell I will!" The elder Kaltagonus all but screeched completely undignified, his face turning a nasty shade of purple.

There was that word again, Harry mused. And every time it was mentioned, the Paraffin had that same angry reaction, and everyone else around him was staggered. What did it mean and why was it bad?

It wasn't long before a reaction similar to the redhead's made itself known. "My sons will not take on erâstai, Zeus. They are barely two months; I will never allow it."

The High Being rose to his full height, his face an irate storm, intent on intimidating his son-in-law. "You have no say in their upbringing. You are a soldier, a servant to my rule."

"I am his father," Spiridon hissed in a deadly whisper, stepping toe to toe with the startled High Being. "That allows me more right than you."

Zeus looked murderous as he pulled the infant tighter to himself. Everyone else stood around the two in shock, afraid of what might happen if they interfered. When Kaltagonus broke the tense silence with a whine, Athena took charge of the situation. "Father, I am sure you have measures to take with the Cabinet. You should not linger." She tentatively held out her arms for the baby, piercing her husband with a glare as she waited.

"Yes," Zeus replied tightly and handed Kaltagonus back to Athena. He scowled at Spiridon. The General only placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. "We will confer about their futures later." He shamelessly grinned at Lily. "Forgive me, I shall have to partake in the pleasantries another day. It will be a pleasure, of this I am sure." With one last meaningful glance at the rattled witch, he glided toward the back row of Celestials, not sparing the incensed General a glance. Lily and Harry's eyes followed him until she was sure he would not disrupt again.

An uncomfortable silence followed, broken only by Starbuck and Nikola's gurgles and the chatter around them. Lily and James exchanged looks at Spiridon and Athena glaring daggers at one another. "Well, James and I have to prepare for your arrival."

"Really, that is not necessary."

"Nonsense," Lily waved her off, weaving her arm around James'. "We really must go. We'll see you soon?"

"An hour." Spiridon glared at his wife but she seemed to have missed it.

James nodded respectfully to Spiridon and Daedelus (he reserved a sneer for Snape) and escorted Lily out the sunlit doors. As the memory swirled in color once again, the last thing Harry saw was Snape scratching at his left forearm.

When the gusts died, Harry realized they were now at his parents' house in Godric's Hollow. The sitting room looked the same as the cottage's, save for the shiny tea service in on the table and an

assortment of stuffed wizard toys on a blanket laid out on the floor. James was seated on the floor beside it waving his wand at the stuffed dragon, making it dance on cue. "My part's done." He solemnly announced, standing to his feet and brushing his wizard robes off, sweeping his fingers in his already messy hair. "Need help?"

"No, thank you," Lily replied, adjusting the teacups and wringing her hands. "Is it good?"

"Fine ... for the hundredth time. And what are you so nervous for? They're our friends, aren't they? We don't need to impress them any more." James grumbled. "Unless you're trying to astound the children with your spectacular buff up on the porcelain."

"James ... "

"I don't think they drink tea at such a young age. Perhaps I'd better fetch the mead instead."

"James ... "

"Being such refined children as they are, Zeus wouldn't want anything less, right? Mead it is! Mead for the babies!"

"All right," Lily laughed shaking her head. "I'm neurotic, I confess. I just want everything to go well."

"For what? It's not like we're asking them for anything. You already know the kingdom will call you the eldest one's beautiful godmother," Lily blushed and looked away as James grabbed her hands. "And — loathe as it is to even think it — Snivelly is his godfather. The poor lad."

"Got that right." Kaltagonus agreed, shaking his head and muttering to himself again.

James opened his mouth to say more when a loud whoosh sounded from another room. "Jamesie? Lilibet? Have you come back yet?"

Harry instantly recognized Sirius' voice and nearly ran over (or through) his father to locate him. He arrived at a small drawing room, barely decorated but for a handmade rug and a couch before the



glowing fireplace. Harry spotted Sirius' head floating in the hearth flames looking considerably happier than he had at the hospital. He smiled widely as he saw James. "There you are."

"What's my real name and Animagus form?"

Sirius rolled his eyes, and shook his head. "Is this really necessary? We're practically the only ones who know your grate program."

James nodded. "Yep. Sounds like you already. But it's a safety measure. C'mon: Name and Animagus form?"

The gray-eyed wizard sighed. "You are Prongs, a handsome stag, defender of the defenseless — and by defenseless, I mean Wormtail."

"Hey!" A muffled voice called from behind him. There was a noise that sounded vaguely like a slap before Sirius motioned for him to continue.

"What's my favorite color?"

"Whatever Lily's wearing at the moment. Except pink, because real men don't like pink; and we won't get into the unpleasantness of your great Aunt Louise's whiskey fiasco. Sour memories, that; sour memories."

"Wimbourne Wasps or the Appleby Arrows?"

Sirius gave a short, contemptuous laugh. "Neither. Magpies for the Cup! Can you hurry this up? I swear Peter's drooling on my arse back here." Harry's face contorted in disgust.

"S'not wholly unpleasant, is it?"

"Shut up, Moony!" James snorted as Sirius' head turned to yell at Remus behind him. He returned with a scowl. "Finish it off, already!"

"All right. Here's a thinker: McGonagall in a negligee or Miranda Dorcas in fig leaves?"

"God, my lunch's coming back up," Sirius gagged. "Neither! Both would make my knob fall off."

"I agree," James commended with a grimace. "Finally, who wears fuzzy red scanties?"

Sirius' lips pursed. "Fuzzy red, you say? Then that'd be Peter."

"I-I-I heard that!" Another slapping noise sounded and Sirius chuckled.

James nodded. "Right, I meant fuzzy green scanties with silver trimming."

"And tinsel?"

James shrugged. "If it strikes your fancy, don't let me stop you."

"Snively!" Sirius sang with a beam.

"Knew it was you all along." James sank into the couch. "To what do I owe this esteemed visit, Mr. Padfoot?"

Sirius shook his head, scattering embers all over the hearthrug. "Remus, Peter and I were just checking on you two. It's right boring without you here, Prongsie. Peter isn't nearly as good a substitute for Snivellus. For one, his screams are entirely all wrong, not nearly girly enough; wouldn't do Snively a bit of justice."

James scoffed. "Yeah. Did you hear the news? Snivellus is the new godfather for Athena and Spiridon's firstborn."

"What?"

"Right? That's ridiculous!" James shook his head with a scowl, crossing his arms petulantly. "The poor kid's going to have to suffer for the rest of his life. And his gifts? They're bound to be awful: newt eyes for his birthday a-and-and oak amber for Halloween and variegated dragon shite for Yule. . . ."

"Oh, the poor lad," Sirius sympathized and shook his head. "I thought you were a shoo-in."

"So did I!" Exclaimed the messy-haired wizard. "I mean, who doesn't love me? I'm loveable, right?"

"Very." Sirius replied without hesitation.

"They really need someone who's fun and exciting. I'm fun and exciting, right?"

"Unquestionably!"

James snapped his fingers. "And funny! What's a godfather without the funny?"

"A Snape, obviously; the bloody twit." Sirius supplied helpfully before his expression turned serious. "And Lily? How is she faring?"

James frowned soberly. "She's all right. There was this moment back when the children were brought in where ... " he abruptly paused, too upset to finish the memory. He shook his head sadly. "But she's all right. By the time the ceremony was over, she was already bickering with Spiridon."

"Again?" Sirius let out a relieved snort. "What's going on with those two? First she hates him, then she's fine, now she hates him again."

"Yeah," James halfheartedly chuckled. He peered at Sirius over the rim of his glasses. "You ... you don't think — I mean, he couldn't, right?"

The gray-eyed wizard stared at James in bewilderment, but he seemed to understand moments later. "Oh. Oh! No, no. I think he's just concerned for her well-being, mate. He's married, isn't he?"

"But he was always around when Lily was pregnant, and now we barely see him."

"Yes, but that was while Athena was pregnant and those two spent a great deal of time together, so of course he was always around."

"No," James shook his head, rumpling the hair atop it. "I don't ... I don't mean that. I mean — he was always there, just ... hovering. Barely took his eyes off Lily, I wanted to sock him right proper, but it's ... something — something else. Something much deeper." He thoughtfully paused and Sirius allowed him quiet to muse. James

slowly shook his head. "I can't explain it, Sirius, but ... it was almost as if he ... he was ... protecting Lily."

Harry snorted derisively. "Protecting? It's she who needs protecting from him."

"James — "

"Oi, Padfoot! Honestly! You've been at it a while! Let's have a turn!"

"Keep your pants on!" Sirius snapped, half-turning in the grate. "Budge over, Pete! Let Moony have a turn."

There was a noise from the foyer and James briefly acknowledged it. "Actually Sirius, they're here, so I've got to run." Sirius' face fell a bit before he dutifully nodded.

"Give us a ring on the Floo if you need anything. And if you want to talk more," his face expressed sincerity as he lowered his voice. James idly nodded, rubbing his hands over his face. "Give my best — "

"Our best, you manky sod!"

"Oh, all right, no need to get nasty." Sirius replied in annoyance. "Give our best to Lily." With a short farewell, the green flames and Sirius disappeared. Harry followed James out of the room into the corridor leading to the foyer. There he found the elder Kaltagonus, still near the couch as Lily welcomed Athena, Spiridon and their armfuls of babies.

"Here, take Starbuck," Spiridon practically dropped the blond into Lily's arms. Harry bristled when she frowned and held the blond child as requested; he could tell she really was really uncomfortable holding the blond child. From the expression on his face, Harry could easily tell Spiridon knew that as well. James seemed to have caught on to his wife's discomfort and his gaze fleetingly turned sympathetic before he broke the short silence.

"I do hope the journey was all right?" James inquired, quickly grabbing a stuffed dragon and waving before a delighted Nikola's face. Lily seemed to relax enough to cradle Starbuck delicately, almost guardedly as if making sure he wasn't going to break (or die,

Harry grimly mused), offering the couch to the Celestials as she and James took matching armchairs.

"We fared well," Athena smiled, tucking her daughter in a comfortable position. "I must admit I was a bit hesitant; this is the first time we have ever traveled with them. It was quite daunting."

"They don't look any worse for the wear," Lily timidly smiled at the beaming Nikola. "I take it they've bonded well?"

Athena hummed in approval. "Mostly. We had some trouble with Kaltagonus; I imagine he wanted to remain in the womb a little while longer." They shared a laugh joined by Nikola. "Although Starbuck and Nikola were quite agitated on the walk here, but Kaltagonus was quite peculiar; almost as if he was expecting — "

"Lovely place you have," Spiridon disrupted, eyeing the décor. "Very ... "

"Flat? Tasteless? Poor?" Suggested the red-haired Being.

"As compared to what — the palace?" Harry argued. "Besides, they're in hiding, they can't exactly — and why am I still talking? You can't even bloody well hear me. . . . " He griped, folding his arms and staring at the adults.

"Warm," Spiridon coolly replied. "Very inviting." Lily merely raised her brow at the General's forced words: it looked like she hadn't believed them for a second.

"Oh, where are my manners? Would you care for some tea and biscuits?" James offered, only after receiving a pointed glare from his wife.

Harry sharply eyed Kaltagonus as he sighed. "Why did that damn Calchas send me here: to watch my parents get sloshed over tea and biscuits? There's nothing here that remotely proves Lily and I are blood-related."

As if on cue, Athena spoke up. "Oh, Spiridon, set the boy down. You have been carrying him since morning. And unwrap him please, you do not want him to be overly warm. Give Lily a turn; after all,

Severus is not here to thwart her introduction." Her saucy remark earned her a fierce look from the General.

"About that — "

"Not now, James." Lily warned, gratefully handing him a fussy Starbuck. She smoothed her skirt nervously and held her arms out expectantly. "Can I ... ?" Her fingers twitched in anticipation.

Spiridon pursed his lips and seemed to unconsciously clutch the child tighter, widening the space between him and Lily. His eyes narrowed and he turned to his wife. Her expression brooked no room for argument. Almost in a defeated manner, he arranged the blanket around the nearly naked Cherub, tucked it nicely over his head and studied his puerile features. His dark eyes suddenly lit up as he cast a fleeting look at his giggling daughter. "You haven't yet met the others." Lily's eager smile wavered a bit and Harry prickled with anger, scowling at the General's blatant diversion. He hoped they'd see it for it really was.

"Spiridon, you are being silly."

"Oh, no," Lily disagreed with a thwarted smile, dropping her outstretched arms. Harry thought he could see a sliver of an annoyed glint in her eyes. "I was holding Starbuck, yes?" She motioned to the drowsy blond. James' brow creased as he studied the child, whose eyes were now wide with interest.

"Yes," Spiridon replied, holding Kaltagonus closer. Harry noticed his mother's bridled annoyance and expression of defeat. He couldn't blame her; he felt like snapping at the man himself. "Starbuck Spirideus, after both his grandfather and I."

"Inventive." James nodded his approval.

"And that is Nikola," the General nodded to the child in his wife's embrace. "She takes after her mother, I think. She certainly possesses her beauty." The elder Kaltagonus rolled his eyes.

"Enough of this romantic tripe. I'm actually getting nauseous." He hunched over, resting on his knees and shaking his head.

"You're so dramatic." Harry retorted.

Lily nodded at the cheerful infant who was being entertained by a dancing dragon. Her eyes slid over to the bundle in Spiridon's lap. "And ... who is this?"

The man clearly hesitated. "You have not told me about your wedding. How was it?" Green eyes narrowed in his direction, matched by Spiridon's even stare.

"Spiridon," Athena firmly admonished, breaking him out of his staring match with Lily, "there will be time enough for such matters later." Lily appreciatively smiled at the Entity.

Harry watched Spiridon's face harden and his eyes grow dim as he faced the witch. Lily and Spiridon held each other's gazes — hers mildly piqued and his confrontational — before Athena gave her husband a piercing look. "You will have to excuse my lord husband; he is very defensive when it comes to our firstborn. Why, I heard the matrons gossiping about him employing the use of lord Hades' Cerberus for the nursery!"

The women chuckled kindly in jest as Spiridon's face only grew harder. "Nevertheless, this is Kaltagonus," the Entity continued. "Your godson, Lily."

Harry felt a pang of remorse as Lily's irked mood softened and she nervously grinned, holding her arms out. "I'd love to hold him."

"Spiridon?" Prompted Athena.

Spiridon pursed his lips, staring at the Cherub on his lap in defeat. His hard eyes sharply caught Lily's and bore into them. "You will be careful with him." It came out as more of a threat than a question.

"Of course," James responded in a near-scandalized tone. The red-haired witch silently agreed with a raised, challenging brow. When Spiridon's fingers buried themselves further in the folds of Kaltagonus' blanket, Lily's lips thinned and her gaze hardened. If the General wanted a fight, he was definitely matched by the uncompromising witch; Harry smirked at Lily's resolve. With a serious look, Spiridon reluctantly settled the infant in Lily's arms. His hands lingered, but he brought them down with a sharp look from Athena.

"There now, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Though Lily's tone held teasing, it was clear she was taunting the General something fierce. Spiridon's dark eyes narrowed as Lily's glance briefly flickered up to his before returning to the gaping infant. "Hello there, love." With a gentle grin, Lily's fingers reverently explored the baby's curved chin and wet lips, they pinched his small round and reddened cheeks, and ghosted over his tiny nose ultimately stopping their movement as she reached the child's inquiring stare.

The effect was instantaneous. Lily's eyes held something deep and unexplainable as blue and once dull green gazes locked. Lily froze, her eyes almost glazing over as they held each other's attention. The infant tilted his head in a manner most unsuitable for a child; it was as if he was ... searching Lily, his eyes slightly narrowed and his small pink lips pursing.

All in all, Harry found it rather frightening.

The baby Kaltagonus even shifted in her embrace, becoming even quieter and more observant. Wide blue eyes seemed to map the witch's features, dragging over every line and curve and angle, memorizing: learning. Lily's brow creased as her fingers tightened around the small torso, her thumbs settling directly over the bundle of blankets where the baby's heart should have been. "Kaltagonus." She whispered reverently, unreadable emotions flickering behind her emerald stare. Spiridon seemed to hold his breath until Lily broke the tense silence and their steady gaze with a bewildered look, her eyes widening. Without upsetting the infant on her lap she jolted as if shocked, jerking her thumbs away from Kaltag's chest.

"Lily?" James worriedly inquired, ready to hand Starbuck over if the need arose.

"He ... he feels warm," she began uncertainly, gingerly pressing her thumbs over the Cherub's heart. This seemed to please him as a slobbery smile stretched across his young face. "I feel ... energy; warm, beating energy."

The General scoffed, settling back in his armchair with an unpleasant grin. "Why of course he's warm; he's a baby. I'm told they must be warm to survive, yes?" James and Athena looked rightly angered, but Lily paid him no mind as she tilted her head,



miming Kaltagonus. "And yes, his chest is beating: that's undoubtedly his heart. If you were wondering, that means he's quite all right and living." Spiridon mocked with a narrowed gaze. Still, Lily ignored him; her fingers gently wormed themselves under Kaltag's blanket.

"No, I feel a ... a light, happy thrumming. Almost like a ... a pulse."

Spiridon's eyes glittered with apprehension before he cleared his expression and sneered. "Impossible."

Harry smirked when his mother leveled the general with a glare. "I know what I feel, General, and that is no mere heartbeat," she defended, clutching the unresisting infant close. Harry felt a grim satisfaction when Spiridon scowled. "I feel fast, warm, happy pulses. His ambience ... his power is rather overwhelming." Harry indeed noticed for the first time her face was flushed.

At Spiridon's quiet scoff, both Athena and James glared in his direction. Lily broke the tense silence with a startled noise. The others turned to the infant Kaltagonus who happened to be smiling. "You see?" James pointed out. "You said he never smiles. He's smiling, isn't he?"

"Must be the present company," Athena added. James smiled in thanks, raising an eyebrow at Spiridon's dark look.

Lily's melodic laughter suddenly filled the room. "I could swear his eyes just turned green."

"Nonsense." Spiridon barked casually, but his stance was rather tense.

"Really?" Athena inquired. "He must be Memorizing you, it's quite rare," she turned to her husband. "And so uncanny, at such a young age. He will be powerful and strong ... like my father." She added the latter for good measure; Spiridon just scowled.

Lily rubbed the Cherub's blanket between her fingers and stared at him pensively as he made a noise, his small fingers grasping at the cloth. Harry narrowed his eyes as Lily's brow furrowed and she stared at the child's antics. The baby Kaltagonus made a frustrated sound and he jerked the blanket surrounding him. All the adults

watched the fussy child in rapt attention. Harry's eyes followed Spiridon's every move as the General leaned forward; no doubt to thwart suspicion off of his gestures. "Perhaps he tires of your embrace? Here, let me have him." Harry inwardly shouted in triumph as everyone seemed to ignore him.

The Cherub continued tugging at the blanket, trying to convey something. Suddenly, the elder Kaltagonus straightened, his expression mimicking Lily's. "He wants you to take it off." He whispered, his forehead creasing in suspicion.

At last, Lily finally seemed to understand. "Oh, I think he. . . . Can I — ?" She motioned to the coverlet practically bound around the baby. The child made a joyful noise.

"Yes," James encouraged while feigning conversation with Starbuck. "He can't be terribly comfortable wrapped in wool, right little mate? It's summer. Loosen him up." Starbuck giggled a response.

"No."

"Of course." Athena threw her husband a challenging look. Harry snorted as the general gnashed his teeth in exasperation.

The Celestial couple was ignored as Lily clasped the blanket and unraveled the grinning infant.

"See? He's glad it's off." James chimed.

"Ka!" the red-haired baby grinned toothlessly in James' direction. Slowly he faced Lily with a disarming smile and innocently extended his small, chubby arm to clutch a handful of Lily's red curls. After studying his fistful for a brief moment, the baby Being's wide azure eyes captured Lily's, speaking volumes in that one glance.

A slow, remorseful smile stretched across the dark-haired wizard's face as his eyes fell upon the sight. "You're a natural, Green-Eyes," He quietly stated, his eyes shining with emotion. The spark in Lily's eyes dimmed somewhat, and her expression faltered before she carried on. "Oh, see here," James cocked his head aside. "That's strange. I'd say his hair's as red as yours, darling."

Kaltag's little fist tightened around his auburn prize, and the child, never breaking eye contact with the witch, whispered a definitively enigmatic, "ba." Lily's eyes widened. Spiridon froze in his chair.

Harry felt as if his eyes would roll out of their sockets they were moving so fast. He wasn't sure what Spiridon was trying to do by burying the child in blankets and covering his head; the Potters would have found out sooner or later by the way Lily clung to the children. Furthermore, it was surprising that any parent would want to cover that up.

But of course, Spiridon wasn't just any parent. Harry quietly seethed.

Baby Kaltagonus' hair did bear a startling resemblance to Lily's, if not slightly darker. "Yes," Athena nodded pensively, "I have never noticed that before. Does it not mirror Lily's, Spiridon?"

The man in question appeared to be grinding his teeth. "His is darker." He tersely replied.

Lily's fingers were rolling the strands of hair between them as she thoughtfully studied the baby. "But ... why?" She inquired to no one in particular, her eyes locked on the infant's. "Why is it red ... like mine? Neither of you have his coloring." Baby Kaltagonus burbled happily in response. The elder merely frowned.

"Humans call it incomplete dominance," Spiridon hurriedly answered, sitting straighter in his chair. "You never told us about the wedding —"

"We spent a great deal of time together while our bellies were full," Athena began with a sad smile. "He must have taken a particular liking to you and gleaned some of your character into himself." Spiridon swallowed hard. James gave Starbuck a mock-curious stare at which the infant laughed. Lily did not look convinced.

"Ah, and could you ask for a better person?" James flattered, making faces at Starbuck. Athena was the only one that shared his laugh.

"He did choose a good person. Who better to model himself after than his dedicated godmother?" Praised the Entity.

They seemingly missed Spiridon's scoff. Harry, however, didn't fail to notice his mother's skeptical expression.

Her lips flattened to a thin line and her eyes tightened at the corners; with a thoughtful expression, she swept her fingers through the red tuft of hair. Baby Kaltagonus cooed, releasing her hair and grabbing for her hands. Spiridon tensed. Lily's expression turned intense as the infant's smile faltered and he made a noise of worry.

The Cherub's eyes widened impossibly as Lily shook her head, turning away from the grinning infant to face the Celestials. If he were totally honest, Harry would say the smile looked forced. "Well, then. You wanted to hear about our wedding? I'll gather wedding albums then, shall I?"

Reluctantly, she stood and handed the protesting Cherub back to Spiridon, who visibly relaxed. As soon as Lily turned toward the door of the next room, the stoic, quiet baby — whom Harry recalled rarely ever showed emotion when he was around his parents — suddenly belted out a very loud wail. Athena and Spiridon froze for a moment, looking for all the world as if they'd never heard him cry. Which, Harry could only assume by their reactions, it probably wasn't common.

Then, it was mass chaos.

Nikola's lip began to quiver and she sluggishly thrashed in her mother's arms, seeking attention. This then triggered Starbuck, who's happy face slackened into a look of pure confusion ("His signature look," the elder Kaltagonus spitefully stated) before he, too, made a strange choking noise.

"Oh, my," James gave a nervous snort. "He's got a set on him, doesn't he? Lungs, I mean," he quickly added at Athena's scandalized look. James was certainly correct; Harry had to cover his ears to block the wailing of the infant. By the way Kaltag was howling, one would've thought he was being slowly murdered. "Um, could you possibly, maybe, perhaps, by any chance ... turn him off?" Suggested James as he bounced the whimpering Starbuck on his knee.

Spiridon quickly draped the coverlet around the redheaded child once more, scrunching his face at his jarring wails. The General

stood the infant in his arms and soothingly patted his back, whispering words of comfort.

Baby Kaltagonus only cried louder.

"Jeez! No wonder you've got such a big mouth!" Harry yelled over the baby's bawling.

"Could he be hungry? Babies drink liquids, right?" A panicked James asked, miming Spiridon's stance to soothe the near-sobbing Starbuck. Athena did the same with an on-the-verge Nikola. "We've got things: pumpkin juice, water, firewhiskey — what's he drink?"

"He isn't hungry," Athena called over the steadily rising cries.

"Then what is it?"

"It's nothing, he's fine," Spiridon waved them off as he calmly cooed in the red-faced boy's ear.

"WAAAA!"

James snorted, settling his own bundle of blankets. "If he turns red in the face over nothing, then I'd hate to see what he does when there is something."

Spiridon's eyes darkened. "He's fine." He coldly insisted even as Kaltagonus continued to contradict him through his cries.

"Spiridon!"

"WAAAAAAA!"

"Please, it's no bother, really. If he's hungry, we can — "

"What? Go out and milk a Briton?" Snarled the General.

"WAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"Spiridon, please!"

"Dear God!" The elder Kaltagonus exclaimed with an annoyed glare. "Could you be any louder?"

The baby howled even louder. "Apparently, you can." Harry idly commented.

"Look," James crossly began as he shifted the blond boy to one shoulder. "I don't know much about babies, but I do know they cry when they want something. Now, if you're gonna be a prat and try to convince me — and fail at it, I might add — that nothing's wrong, fine. But I'm suggesting we do something about them if we're to have a nice proper tea." Although in Harry's opinion, there was no saving the tea. Granted, Starbuck and Nikola had quieted after having received attention from James and Athena respectively, but it appeared baby Kaltagonus had no intention of backing down. If anything, it seemed he had grown louder.

"I so want to throw a Silencing Charm at you right now," Harry glared at the elder redhead, shaking his head angrily.

"I — "

But James waved off Spiridon's next dismissal and he turned to his white-faced wife. "Lily, could you please ... oh, dear." Harry almost didn't want to know what was happening now, but forced himself to peel his glare off of Spiridon's murderous scowl to his mother.

"Oh, Lily," Athena sympathetically gasped, clutching Nikola close to her bosom as her brown eyes befell her friend.

Harry's eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw his mother. Lily's face was drained of color, and her dull eyes were wide as she stared down at the mess on her blouse. It seemed she had made quite the mess of herself, with dual wet patches soaking the front of her robes where she'd unconsciously lactated. Harry's heart throbbed in pity.

With an erratic movement, Lily folded her arms across her damp chest self-consciously and looked at the floor when she spoke. "That's—it's never happened before—not with—Molly and-and-and Marlene—I—seventeen weeks, so I shouldn't," she disconnectedly began, her breath coming out in pants with every word spoken. "I—he must've ... triggered—I—read somewhere that it could following miscarr—misc—when babies ... when ... I'm sorry." The apology

came out as a sob and she rushed quickly from the room, no doubt in embarrassment and painful remembrance.

James made a step to go after her, but stopped himself, his eyes sliding shut as a door slammed in the distance. Sighing sadly, James heavily sat in his armchair, holding the infant Starbuck close as if his life depended on it. Harry could almost feel the world drop from under him, he felt as lost as his father. Athena stared out the darkened exit in sympathy, and even Spiridon looked ashamed, though very wary as he thumped the baby's back. But all the while, baby Kaltagonus cried, louder and louder. It was only as the world materialized before his eyes that Harry saw what the infant had wanted.

His small body was stretched, his fingers grasping and his short arms desperately reaching out for the doorway that Lily had gone through.

oooooooooooo

A/N: Merry Christmas! Feel the urge to get me something? Review — the gift that keeps on giving! Thanks! ;)

A/N 2: The idea for the ward around baby Kaltag's cradle came directly from Charmed, when baby Wyatt's barrier sprung up around people he didn't trust? So yeah ... that takes care of that. Also, I forgot to mention there was a deleted scene on the website from the last chapter. It's still there, and on the Yahoo Group, so if you're interested, check it out.

A/N 3: This will more than likely be the last update of this year (aww... :( ). Next month, I'm due to start university, so until I can see what my classes are like I can't say for sure when the next installment will be out. Rest assured, I will do my absolute best to continue with the monthly updates.

## Chapter Thirty-Two: Within These Walls (aka, 'Til Death Do Us Part), Part IV

"As interesting as all this is — and believe me, this warped flight of fancy is intriguing," were the first words out of Kaltagonus' mouth, "I'm still not convinced, and your blatant evasion of the point is taking up good snogging time. You stiffs have five minutes to dazzle me."

"Trust you to think of snogging at a time like this," Seethed Harry, shaking his head and crossing his arms. As usual, he went ignored.

"You evil beast!" Agamemnon slammed his fists on the table and stood in his seat. "You will respect your elders! You will use a proper title when addressing us, when addressing kings!"

Kaltagonus gave Agamemnon a bored look as Odysseus pulled him back down. "What does it matter what I call you, Sunshine? You're dead."

"YOU—!"

"With each and every encounter," Hector disrupted the ruffled Mycenaean at the top of his voice, "between Lily Potter and Golradir, their previous connection grew stronger and stronger."

"As a result, a bond was created." Andromache finished.

"One not unlike the union between a Cherub and its parent, which you bore witness to," Penelope continued, "though this bond was most unobtrusive to all those who did not see its signs. Athene passed Lily's behavior off as mourning, seeking to fill a void left by her deceased babe."

"As a consequence, it became increasingly difficult for Pallas Athene and the General Spiridon to separate mother and child, even more so when Lily Potter began to unravel the truth."

Kaltagonus looked preoccupied as silence rang throughout the clearing. "But ... how?" His brow creased, curious. "Did she know, I mean?"



Achilles tipped his chin, almost thoughtfully. "How else would a mother recognize her own child? She sensed him, boy." Came his simple reply.

Harry and Kaltag each blinked. "'Sensed ... him'? That's it?" The Being's tone was bordering on incredulous.

"That's it." Achilles' response was clipped.

"That's boring," Harry quietly muttered, disappointed. With all the chaos that occurred around the existence of Golradir, Harry would have thought the answer to be a bit more exciting.

"All right," Kaltag replied, disappointment coloring his voice.

Calchas leaned forward as he continued the tale. "Lily Potter's unending quest to find her child soon put a strain on not only her marriage to the wizard James Potter, but also on the goddess Athene's marriage. The children were a constant presence at the Potters' household, so much in fact they began to see less and less of their palatial estate on Olympus and more of the supposed madness of Lily Potter.

"Closer and closer she became to you, Kaltagonus, as Golradir continually called out to her through you."

"I thought he was dormant."

"To an extent," Hector amended. "Golradir was completely suppressed when he merged with you in the womb, but due to the stress of labor, our intervention between your spirits waned, and your souls became equal. He now could control you as much as you can control him."

Kaltagonus' face fell, his eyes wide with apprehension. "However, in the not too distant future, you do regain some restraint over him; else, we would not be here today." Harry noted Kaltag's shoulders relaxed some.

"I know the birth broke his dormancy, and that you more than likely interfered somehow otherwise I wouldn't be here," the Being slowly began, "but why Lily? Why would Lily recognize Golradir so fondly and Athena not suspect a thing? If she sensed him," Kaltagonus'

brow furrowed as he theorized, "then why call out to Lily, and not Athena? She would be the logical choice."

"Yes," Calchas nodded. "You are correct. The goddess Athene would be a more appropriate choice as she outclasses any witch in power. However—"

"I'm starting to hate that word." Gripped Harry.

"—Golradir was born of Lily Potter," Odysseus emphasized, "And therefore, could control her due to their maternal association."

"So he was trying to get to her," Kaltagonus realized. "To control her and continue his purpose."

"Boy's not a stupid as he looks," Agamemnon guffawed. He squawked in indignation when Kaltagonus shot him the bird. "DON'T THINK I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS, BOY!"

"Please!" Calchas called them to order, sending Kaltagonus a disapproving look. "Your disrespect should be reserved for those who deserve it, Golradir." Kaltagonus bristled. "Do not attempt that again, or you will regret it. Now, if you two are quite finished?" Kaltag crossed his arms and looked away, while Agamemnon glared to his right at Achilles, openly chuckling.

"Their bond was a strain on her marriage, but even more so on Athene and Spiridon's, with new trouble looming on the horizon."

"Lily was a sore subject between them." Penelope continued.

"So sore, in fact," Odysseus resumed, "even in the face of overwhelming trauma, Lily Potter's desires were not to be ignored."

"Thus began the endeavor to dissociate Lily Potter completely from Golradir's grasp."

Moments later, Harry's world was swarmed with the color and sound of a new memory.

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(Olympos, the Nursery belonging to Pallas Athene at O Oíkos Tōn Díos (The House of Zeus). Tuesday, October 16, 1979. 5:20 PM.)

Harry easily recognized the room's décor as part of the palace at Olympus. If that wasn't a dead giveaway, the sight of Athena attempting to dress a fidgety blonde baby (Nikola, perhaps?) was proof enough. As he was glancing toward the elder Kaltagonus, Harry's hatred swelled in him when he spotted Spiridon, carefully shrouding a displeased redheaded infant in a forest green blanket as a gentle wind swept the room. As it was, though focused on their respective handfuls across the room, the couple seemed to be deep in conversation.

"...Ares has kindly taken over my duties as I settle into motherhood," Athena mentioned as she pried the small fist from its grasp of her robe. "I am sure he will be grateful for my brief pass of the torch."

"Yes, well," Spiridon began in exasperation as he once again covered the irked infant's head. "Your brother has taken that torch and set fire to the nation. The stench of death and war chokes the air of Olympos and the world." The General accused, giving the month-old Kaltagonus a stern look as his hands knocked the blanket off his head again. "Your brother is bringing death wherever he roams, and he enjoys it."

Athena threw her husband a dark look. "You speak embellished truths."

"I do not," Spiridon hotly insisted. "The Underworld overflows with his ambitions; the souls lingering fore Hades' gates are proof of that. You must retake your post soon or Ares will be the cause of Olympos' fall," Harry wanted to cuff him as he growled lowly in his throat and tucked the coverlet over the protesting Cherub's hair. "Ares is encouraging the war to satisfy his own thirst for devastation and your father is allowing it to happen and — would you stop taking that off!" He turned his heated words to the younger Kaltagonus.

"Spiridon!" Scolded Athena when the infant's eyes began to water. "Do not set your ire to our son!"

She gathered her mass of blonde hair and giggles into her arms and gently deposited the child in a nearby bassinet. A surge of retribution swelled in Harry as Athena gave her husband a nasty look,

collecting the whimpering redhead to her chest, rubbing his back soothingly.

"And you wonder why I didn't like you," elder Kaltagonus grumbled, scowling at the General.

"You must bridle your rage, Spiridon," the Entity reprimanded. "Especially in the face of the children. You know how sensitive Kaltagonus is."

The Being in question made an odd squawking noise. "I am not sensitive!" he argued with the memory. Harry just snickered, feeling no urge to defend the prefect.

Athena rocked the upset Cherub in her arms even as Spiridon appeared apologetic. "You did not use Lily's blanket as I requested. And why do you continue to cover his hair?" Spiridon turned away with a sharp sigh. "Are you ashamed of him? Are you not proud of the life we have created? And do not think me so thick as to not notice you only drown him in cloths when we visit the Potters," Harry could see the muscles seize up in Spiridon's back. The blonde all but sneered, "I am not called the goddess of Intellect because my face is pretty."

"This is the fourth time since last Tuesday we're visiting them. I would rather our children stay on Olympus for once." The General feebly argued as he slid into a tunic. "They have seen the inside of the Potters' home more than their own cradles."

"Nonsense," Athena scoffed, unraveling the coverlet and monitoring Kaltag's disposition. "Moreover, Lily loves them, and I will not deny her—"

"Our children?" the dark-haired Celestial spun around and snapped. "She already covets our firstborn. By visiting her so often, you are only encouraging her."

Athena, as well as boys, bristled. "Perhaps she needs some encouragement at this delicate time in her life."

"The woman lost her child, not her life," Spiridon lowly growled, his eyes flashing in resentment. "And now she is trying to replace her

child with ours," he gestured to the blue-eyed babe, causing his wife to glare and look away.

"It is hers!" Harry shouted, fuming.

"And you are aware of this." Spiridon continued. "Let the woman grieve for her loss instead of cheering her on."

"She will see reason."

"Not if she sees the children on a daily basis," Volleyed the Being. "You have selective perception when it comes to Lily. You know only what you want to know about her, and blind yourself to all else."

"You are being difficult, and she needs a friend," Harry could tell Athena was trying hard not to raise her voice for the sake of the children. She persisted, "Lily has been devastated. She needs encouragement."

A black look marred the General's face. "Encouragement is what she wants, you say?" He quietly asked, his eyes narrowed. He dismissively motioned to the Cherub wrapped in her arms. "Encourage her then, your highness," he mocked, bowing low. "Hand over our son in a neat, red bow. I'm positive that is all the encouragement she wants."

Harry hated Spiridon even more for the lack of sympathy he possessed for both his wife and Harry's — their mother. A quick glance at the frowning student told him he felt the very same. A heavy silence filled the room and the tension was so taut, Harry was sure it would snap any minute, and rather nastily. Instead, Athena pursed her lips and held to the faintly prattling child tightly. Her words, though soft and calm, heavily contradicted the furious storm raging in her eyes.

"If we do not hasten," she coolly began, "We will be late."

Spiridon's face contorted in annoyance and he dryly replied, "Perish the thought."

But before Athena could righteously snap at him, there was a loud commotion coming from the hall. Both Celestials turned toward the

doors in bewilderment. Spiridon held up his hand to signal quiet as Athena hurriedly made her way toward the other cots.

Harry watched the dark-haired Being stalk over to his hanging armor and unsheathe his sword, carefully moving toward the doors. Before he reached them however, one flew open to admit a pile of armor and an explosion could be heard rocking the corridor. "GET DOWN!" Spiridon shouted at his wife, aiming his sword at the intruder.

It was a well-built, young soldier, whose markings and armor were the same as Spiridon's save for a few differences. "G-General!" The bronze-skinned man frantically exhaled, hastily righting his askew helmet. "It's Mystikos, sir! And his Hybrids! The palace has been breached!"

Spiridon's eyes narrowed in rage. He turned to his startled wife, and then allowed his gaze to wander to the triplets, squirming in their baskets. The General's eyes hardened sternly before he turned to the soldier stoic-faced. With lightning speed, Spiridon slid on his armor and shoved down his helmet, staring at the young warrior seriously in his eyes. "Stay with my wife and guard the children, Major Markés. You do not leave this room for anything."

The man, Markés, looked on the verge of protesting. "But sir—!"

"Do not disobey me, boy!" he snarled, grabbing hold of Markés' armor in a vice-like grip. "Stand guard for the goddess Athene and her children. I order you." Defiance briefly flitted across the Major's gaze before he solemnly nodded once.

"As you wish, sir." With a sharp incline of his head, Spiridon turned his dark eyes to the Entity of Intellect.

"Do not leave this room at all costs. Stay with the children." Waiting for Athena's assent, Spiridon briskly walked out of the room. He shut the door behind him, leaving his wife, Major Markés, the children and Harry and Kaltag alone. The soldier and the Entity momentarily acknowledged each other with a salute before a visibly troubled Athena fussed over her children.

Athena's brow furrowed as shouting and explosions were heard in the distance. "Would it not be wise to leave?"

Markés, who seemed surprised Athena would give him more than a passing glance, placed his hand on the base of his sword. "It would be wiser, your highness, if we were to stay here than be caught in the chaos beyond these doors. General's orders." He silkily replied. "Better to stay here and be captured than leave and risk a higher chance of harm to yourself ... or your children." His eyes strayed to the gurgling bassinets. "The General would put me on the funeral pyre alive if I allow any harm to come to them, most especially the Great Prince Kaltagonus."

"Hm," Harry turned toward the amused Being. "That has a nice ring to it."

Scoffing quietly, Harry watched Athena nod skeptically before allowing Major Markés to resume his watch. It wasn't but a few minutes later that another set of shouts and bangs resounded in the corridor, so close this time, the doors shook from the force. Even intangible, Harry could feel the vibrations from the blast in the floor. Markés immediately had his sword unsheathed, battle-ready.

"No," Athena's voice halted the soldier's advance. She cast a fleeting glance at the oddly quiet bassinets before her aegis shimmered across her bosom and her golden wand was in hand. A helmet was fitted atop her head and her cold eyes glared from beneath the brim. Harry swallowed; he could now see why she was called the Entity of War. "Guard the children, Major Markés." Her calm voice betrayed nothing. "No one enters this room but the General, me, or Captain Diomedes."

Markés' looked at her, incredulous. "Your highness, I beseech—"

"Stay!" She waved her wand threateningly as she moved. Wisely, Markés did not argue. With a flourish of her wand at the trio of bassinets Athena made for the door, determination fixed in her features.

"That's rich," Kaltag reproached as the door shut behind her. "Leaving against your husband's wishes and leaving us without a proper sentry, no less. Entity of Intellect, my ass."

Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation, clenching his fists threateningly at the redhead. "This had better be worth it for all the bloody time I've got to spend with you." He griped aloud.

At the sound of another bang — this time, even closer — Markés scrambled away from the doors and to the triad of bassinets. He removed his helmet with a relieved sigh and curiously glanced into each one, watching the triplets' movements warily. Harry would even go as far as to venture the man looked terrified of the children whose young faces, in spite of the thunderous explosions, hadn't even lost their smiles, which was—given the situation—strange.

The wizard got his answer on the next blast when a translucent ripple could be seen over the cradles, as if absorbing the sound. He vaguely muttered something concerning a Noise-Canceling Charm or some variation, but his attention was quickly drawn elsewhere at Kaltag's expelled breath. When Harry turned on his heel to grouse over what drew the prefect's attention now, he wasn't disappointed.

"Oh, great," the young Being groaned as a shadow advanced. "Just when I thought it couldn't possibly get any worse."

In heavy armor and an even heavier gaze, Mystikos fully stepped into the bedchamber from the open window. His skin was glistening and tanned, healed dark brown cuts riddling his limbs, and his hair and face were wilder than Harry remembered from memory. He had the same glint in his eye that reminded Harry of Bellatrix Lestrange: certifiably insane.

Markés, wide-eyed and gaping, suddenly came to his senses when he spotted the sword in the man's big hands. "Halt!" He demanded, fumbling to pull out his own weapon. "Do not come any closer to the Great Prince, intruder! I order you to lower your weapon and — "

The Gryffindor had barely seen Mystikos swing his large fist and cuff the Major with the hilt of his sword. Markés went down and was out instantly. Mystikos softly scoffed, frowning down at the unconscious soldier.

"Reckless youth," he sneered, pushing the Major out of his path with a dirty boot. Another bang rang out in the hall. "Who are you to challenge me? History remembers the ruthless, and the ruthless destroy the foolhardy: do well to remember that. But I would never seek to destroy you, my beloved boy." His dark eyes shifted from Markés' body to what was unmistakably Kaltag's basket.



"Don't tell me I was kidnapped," Kaltag grumbled, glaring at the dark Celestial.

"I know you are here, my boy," had it not been for the Dark Being's gravelly voice, he would have almost sounded sweet. "Call out to me, beloved." The bronze-toned Being's eyes glittered with what could only be delight as he watched the whining triplets' shields fly up in defense. "Oh, beloved: surely you do not think you can evade me?"

Apparently, baby Kaltagonus couldn't; before Harry could properly comprehend what was happening, Mystikos' eyes glimmered strangely, and he released a deep, rumbling sigh. Harry's eyes widened when an ivory wisp of smoke glided out of his nostrils, not unlike the smoke on the night of the babies' births, dancing over the shield's casing. In a matter of moments, the safeguard promptly vanished, and the vine of smoke lingered around the cot's edge.

"No," the elder Kaltagonus disbelievingly protested. "No!"

"What?" Harry questioned, more confused than ever.

"Come on kid, scream!" Kaltag shouted at his younger self, watching Mystikos proceed for the bassinet. "Talk! Spew your guts up! Do something! Anything but submit!"

"Submit?" Asked Harry, befuddled. What was he going on about?

Two strides later, Mystikos was already bending over the last bassinet, ignoring the fussy Starbuck and Nikola. He brought up an armful of blanket, carefully cradling the redheaded infant and loosening the mantle around his small body. When baby Kaltag's face came into view, Harry noted it was screwed up in apprehension and it looked as if he were about to wail. A momentary feeling of relief came over Harry; surely someone would hear the children and come running.

But he would later remember that the memories prior to and following this one never ended pleasantly.

Mystikos delicately supported the wriggling child in one arm as his free hand gently tipped the small chin to face him, holding the watery, blue-eyed gaze. With a proud smirk, the Dark Being quietly stated, "We cannot have those tears, can we?"

"Come on ... fight it!" Kaltag pleaded beside the still perplexed Gryffindor. As baby Kaltagonus opened his small mouth to deliver what Harry thought would be an impressive shriek, Mystikos' chest heaved and he freed another cloud of smoke. This time, it floated over the baby's face, and Harry was sure he had inhaled this lungful.

The young wizard reacted as fidgety baby Kaltagonus gurgled and fell limp, releasing a puff of gold-tinted smoke in response. Mystikos smirked triumphantly. "Oh, you are a Natural. This is most pleasing, my boy." As Harry rushed over with Kaltagonus, he noticed the infant's eyes were glassy and vacant, as if he'd been cursed with the Imperius.

"We cannot delay, no? We will wait for beloved mother to arrive and I will make her see reason," Mystikos firmly declared as he lightly swayed the baby. "My dearly loved shall then see how right it is to observe you, beloved, in your rightful sire's arms, and she will deny her heart no longer."

"You absolute psycho." Kaltag muttered with an expression of absurdity. Harry found himself hard-pressed to argue.

"And she will leave that deceitful, wretched creature. Too many times has he taken you from me," the self-proclaimed Dark Prince continued in loathing. "No, my adored, I have plans for you, for your future. All will be well tonight, but first we must slay that vermin as he slew — "

It was at that moment Spiridon burst through the doors, his sword poised for a fight. Grudgingly, Harry had to admit he was pleased to see him. The Being's look was one of calm hatred, his eyes seeking out the unmoving Major, and the safeguards on the other baskets. His face was stony and serious as he made his quiet request. "Let loose the boy."

Mystikos scowled, drawing the limp child closer. "I do not think that would be wise..." he paused as commotion continued in the corridor, "...Spardonosos." When the General narrowed his eyes beneath his helmet, Mystikos leered, "Oh, yes. I know. I often wonder how my lady Athene would react if I told her she is competing with the memory of a corpse." Spiridon's hackles raised. "But for the sake of our son — "

"He is not," Spiridon snapped as they slowly began to circle one another. "You are not in touch with the here and now, Mystikos. You speak madness."

"Oh, beloved," Mystikos cooed to the motionless Cherub, "Your father has been a very baaaad man," his chest rumbled in amusement. "When your wits are capable, remind me to tell you the tale of the fool who thought he could deceive me."

However, it seemed all that drew Spiridon's attention was the torpid body in the bundle of blankets. "What've you done to him?" He demanded.

"Nothing a chastising father wouldn't do to his ill-disciplined son," the Dark Being casually replied, toying with Kaltag's flaccid hand. "Why, father," His eyes flashed in spite and threw the General a poisonous look. "Did you not know the boy was a Natural?"

For the first time since he entered the room, Spiridon's façade faltered. He looked fairly alarmed. "He ... how many times have you Compelled him?"

"I assure you, it is no concern of yours."

"Once is too much — he is still a babe!"

"I know how much my firstborn can take," Snarled Mystikos.

"He is not your son! And you know you risk compromising his forces when you dominate him!"

"He is mine and do not tell me how to handle my child, you putrid—!"

Again, the doors were slammed open, this time admitting Daedelus, a scowling Being of War, and a livid Entity of War. At the sight of Athena, Mystikos' nasty temper abated. "Beloved!" He practically sang in delight, adjusting the now slow-moving Kaltagonus in his embrace. "Motherhood has made you even more radiant in Apollo's sun."

Glowing, Athena's russet eyes bore into the man, and her abhorrence intensifying when she noticed the dark green heap held

captive in his arms. "Release my son. Now." Harry could almost feel the revulsion choking the air; her tone brooked no room for argument.

Mystikos, who appeared to have ignored her words in favor of admiring the very sight of her, smiled in his own disturbed way. "Come with us, my beloved. Come where you rightfully belong."

"Both my son and I will stay here," she frigidly answered, holding her golden wand menacingly. "And you will spend the rest of your revolting existence with the Titans in Tartarus."

"I'll bet he thinks that sounds romantic," Muttered Harry.

"Hand over the boy!" Ares gruffly spoke up, his spear's steel flashing in the torchlight. Harry's gaze briefly flitted to Spiridon, who lowered his head in warning.

Smirking, Mystikos' mouth opened to serve what was probably another retort, but it died on his lips. Instead, his eyes scrutinized Athena's every move as she sidled up beside the General, and his eyes all but burned a hole in Spiridon's hand as her knuckles brushed it. Mystikos' demeanor turned sour. "Do not betray me, beloved." He frostily advised.

Athena pursed her lips, unfazed. "I have made my choice and you must accept it."

"I will NEVER accept it!" He raged, spittle flying from his lips. "You will be mine, and we will raise our boy together."

"Give us the boy!" Ares barked.

"You will love me!" Mystikos seethed, holding up the now sniffling Cherub. "Love me, or I will kill the children."

That certainly gave everyone pause. They wavered in their threats, eyeing the crazed Celestial and the children in quick succession. "Don't you dare," Athena's voice dithered slightly. "Don't you dare hurt my children!"

Mystikos' eyes callously bore into hers. "You will forget them, and we will make better, stronger children. Love me," he breathlessly

repeated, bringing his sword over the fussing Kaltagonus. Harry could almost see what was left of the man's sanity teetering over the edge. "Or despair."

"You outrageous bastard." Harry heard the Paraffin whisper in fury. He'd always heard Mystikos had a few screws loose, but seeing it firsthand made the Gryffindor realize just how dangerous he was.

Athena, on the other hand, looked torn between wanting to curse the Dark Prince or give in to his ultimatum. Harry watched her eyes drift over to the shielded baskets, holding Starbuck and Nikola who were, by this time, bawling. She then glanced at the redheaded baby, held tightly against Mystikos' chest, his bottom lip quivering and strange noises coming from his throat indicating his rapidly disappearing resolve. Spiridon slightly shifted and Daedelus' fingers twitched.

Her gaze shifted to Mystikos' blade under the infant's chin and finally, her eyes came to rest on the evil Being's leer. The corners of his lips twitched as if he knew he'd won, at long last getting what he most desired.

"Athene," Spiridon softly began.

"Don't talk to her, you fraud!" Roared Mystikos. "She has made her choice!"

"I don't think she has," The General countered, his fist tightening on his sword.

"Stay out of this!"

"You first," the resolute Spiridon returned. "This is our marriage and these are our children, and we will not take kindly to your meddling." Athena's startled look darted to her husband. "Now: release ... my ... son."

Mystikos' face contorted in rage. "HE IS NOT YOUR — "

"TÓRA!"

"ARRRRGH!"

Daedelus' wrist snapped so fast Harry hadn't even seen the dagger rip through the air until it pierced Mystikos' shoulder. With a guttural cry, Mystikos' threw his sword-arm back, thankfully swinging the blade away from the baby. Unfortunately, he brought his other hand to his wounded shoulder ... the very same arm that clung to baby Kaltagonus.

"NO!" Athena cried as the mass of blankets fell through the air. Harry's eyes widened as the floor was swiftly coming up to meet the redheaded Cherub (the elder Kaltagonus looked absolutely horrified) but the adults were too far to be able to catch him. Well, he dourly mused, at least he knew why Kaltag was so stubborn and intolerant as a teenager; he was dropped as a baby. Had the situation not been so shocking, Harry would have laughed.

But even as Daedelus dove to catch the baby, Harry noticed, to his amazement that the speed of the drop seemed to be slowing down. In fact, it appeared as if someone had thrown an Impediment Jinx at him. While the freefall seemed to have slowed, it wasn't stopped; Athena let out a strangled yell as baby Kaltag did hit the floor ...

... And bounced. Harry gaped. He ... bounced? On a floor that was surely harder than the Being's head? Harry almost surrendered to the urge to wipe at his glasses to make sure he hadn't imagined it.

Nope. It seemed he had seen correct. The Cherub had sprung up as if his coverlet were fitted with springs. He would've vaulted a second time if the newly conscious Markés hadn't caught him and rolled to safety.

While all this was going on, Mystikos snarled, gripping his injured shoulder and rushed for the window, finally leaping out into the darkness. Ares sprinted after him as dozens of soldiers burst into the nursery, arms at ready.

"Ah yes, right on time as usual," Kaltagonus dryly insulted the armor-clad troupe.

"Kaltagonus!" Athena called, clutching the infant close as Markés handed him over to her. Spiridon was by her side in an instant, and helped her scan the child over for any marks or bruises. Harry felt his heart relax as Kaltagonus looked up at Athena with bright blue eyes, grinning toothlessly. For the most part, he didn't look fazed.

"Incredible," she exhaled, her brown eyes large and frightened. "He's not one hair out of place. How can that be?" She asked the General.

Frowning, Spiridon covered the Cherub's bare shoulder, his brow creasing as he stared at the green blanket. As he opened his mouth to speak, he stopped, aware of the tanned soldier being tended to by Daedelus, rubbing the back of his head. "Thank you, Major Markés," he expressed, Athena repeating his words.

Markés inclined his head stiffly. "I am glad the heir is safe, but I should have tried harder to protect him, sir. I am deeply sorry."

"Nonsense," Spiridon replied, crossing over to check on Starbuck and Nikola. "I left you here to protect and be protected. It is not your fault my lady wife cannot bring herself to follow simple directions for her own safety." He shot an annoyed look over Nikola's basket at Athena, who returned his fixed stare as she settled baby Kaltagonus in his cot. Markés looked between the couple in confusion and astonishment, mostly because of Spiridon's blatant slight to Zeus' favorite child.

"He has escaped, disappeared," a ragged Ares reported, surly. "I will take the men and search the rest of the palace and grounds for trespassers. It would be best for you to find sanctuary in a secure place for the night."

"I agree, a safer place," Spiridon affirmed. "The palace is anything but."

Athena nodded in agreement, sweeping a grumbling Starbuck into her arms. "We shall. We have a visit with some magical friends of ours and I am sure they would not mind."

Harry was drawn to Nikola's infantile giggle. Spiridon was staring at the blonde Entity, unimpressed. "You can't be serious."

The blonde's brow knit together in vexation. "You said it yourself. The palace is not safe right now."

"And the Potters' is safer?" At the cynical hitch in the General's voice, the soldiers and Ares quickly filed out of the room, leaving the family in privacy. Spiridon examined Nikola for any injuries and set her

down, gripping the edge of her bassinet. Harry watched him take a steadying breath to keep from berating his wife. "Let Daedelus take you to Crete, or Athens. You will be safest there."

"I insist we go to James and Lily's. What's more, my father forbade us from mingling with the non-magic humans."

The General snorted, sneering, "But that certainly hasn't stopped him from bedding and breeding with them, has it?" Athena's lips thinned and her eyes darkened in indignation. "You think the Potter home is safer? They are in hiding, Athene! They were attacked! We were attacked! Our children's lives were threatened because you decided to leave them without proper, full security! Because of your stubbornness we almost lost our son! And you insist that I listen to your reasoning?"

"You cannot expect me to march our family into a home where there are targets painted on the occupants' foreheads just because Potter's wife can't let the past go! Taking them there, we subject your friend to strain and our children will not be but marginally protected, even with our presence!" Spiridon finished, his voice rising with every word. By the end of his tirade, his face was flushed with anger.

Harry took in the Entity's calm and willful disposition and pursed lips. "I would rather them marginally protected," she quietly stated, "than considerably dead."

Spiridon cast his wife a scathing look and audibly scoffed, angrily walking away. "You should have thought of that before you abandoned our children." It was to the sight of an ashamed Entity of Intellect, staring upon the blue-eyed Kaltagonus that the memory was lost in a tumult of blinding colors.

ooooo

(The Residence at Godric's Hollow. Tuesday, October 16, 1979. 6:06 PM.)

"They're running late."

"They're fine. Come away from the window: it's not safe."



"It's after six. They were supposed to be here at six o'clock."

There was a rustle behind the Prophet, and James finally replied, "It's 6:05, darling."

"6:06!" She nearly exclaimed from her seat by the window. "Something bad has happened, I know it."

Harry watched as his father lowered the newspaper and rolled his eyes. "Would you come away from the window? Nothing's happened; you're overreacting. Besides, if something has, it's really none of our business anyhow," the latter was muttered peevishly.

"My," Harry turned to Kaltag's amused face. "Elephant in the room, anyone?"

Lily nearly fell off her chair as she peered between the dark curtains, staring into the darkness of what could only be the surrounding forest. The shadows of candlelight unmasked the fear in her eyes and Harry could see she had bitten her nails until the skin was raw. At the sound of a periodic tapping, Harry's attention was brought to the nervous jiggle of his mother's heel and his inspection ended on her almost swollen bottom lip, a sign that she'd been nibbling on it for some time.

The Evening Prophet crunched as James once again set it down, eyeing his wife. With a heavy sigh, James rubbed his eyes beneath the frames and shook his head in exhaustion. "Lily, please. I'm sure they're fine and just got held up with something. Besides, you saw them on Sunday last. Just come over from the window and give them time, darling."

"Give!" the redheaded witch suddenly exclaimed, leaping out of her chair with wide eyes. "The gifts! I was supposed to get gifts! Do we still have stuffed toys left over?" She crossed the room quickly toward a large trunk.

"Not like we've any use for them," James glumly replied, burying himself in the Quidditch section.

Lily didn't seem to hear him and continued rummaging in the chest. "Something different, something new, he's played with all of this before. I can't give him old toys!"

"They're not going to know the difference anyhow; they'll dribble all over it like everything else."

"I've a basket! I can make something—a care package! He'll like it, won't he?" She beamed, her eyes bright and somewhat fanatical as she began filling said basket with a colorful array of toys. It pained Harry to see her that way; it certainly wasn't the way he wanted to remember her.

Apparently, his father was feeling the very same. With a heavy sigh, James folded the paper and set it on the table, pausing a moment as his gaze drifted to his wedding band. Grief flickered in his hazel eyes before he pursed his lips and stood, crossing the room to his obsessive wife. "Green Eyes," he softly called.

"Got to find something, something new, something good—yes! I bought another blanket the other day! Accio blanket!" she whipped out her wand and summoned the pale blue item. "It matches his eyes, it does," she mumbled to herself as she reverently added the blanket and tossed a fuzzy lamb over her shoulder.

James swallowed nervously, coming behind her and resting his hands on her arms. "Don't be angry — "

"James, please! They'll be here any minute!" She scolded as a unicorn sailed through the air.

"But I've got to say this," his voice gained strength.

Lily's brow creased and the frown lines around her young mouth deepened. "James, I've got to finish the care package before — "

"I can't help but think," James voiced over her complaints, "that you're spending far too much time with the children. More than normal, Lily." When she faced him and opened her mouth to object, he amended, "I don't think it's healthy for you to spend so much time around them so..." his throat bobbed as he whispered, "...so soon."

Harry watched his father wince as her face fell into a sad look. Lily bit her lip and embraced herself, looking at their shoes. "I think," James continued as he gently caressed her arms, "Athena is sharing her children too much, and she's forcing you to interfere.

There should only be two people in that marriage, but you're making it three." Lily's eyes fell shut. "If we keep going like this, it's only going to bring about a spectacular disaster. Sooner or later, the effort'll be too much for them; and the kids are bound to fall sick since they travel so far so young. And ... I don't want you to be hurt again, Lily."

Lily's face pulled a woeful grimace. "I know, but ... I feel such a," she shook her head, her eyes landing on the window. "A connection to them. Especially to Kaltagonus." The Being started at the mention of his name.

James' eyes narrowed a fraction. "Kaltagonus."

"Mm-hm." Lily gaily nodded. A flash of an unreadable emotion passed over the messy-haired Marauder's eyes.

"Well," a tiny smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. "He does seem quite taken with you. I've never seen a child so eager to get out of their father's arms."

The redheaded witch rolled her eyes. "Well, when you've got that toerag for a father. . . ."

"Cheers." Kaltag muttered.

"Well, we can't choose our parents." James idly commented as she tucked her head under his chin. "So you understand, then?" James questioned, ending their momentary cuddle. "Starting tonight, we'll only see the children once a month?" Lily tensed, abruptly pulling out of the embrace to stare at her husband in shock.

"I didn't agree to that, James."

"Lily, it's the only way you'll fully heal," he chastised, giving her a hard look. "Stop running away from this! You're delaying the inevitable and when it finally does catch up with you..." he trailed off, somberly shaking his head. "Do you not remember what happened when you first heard them cry?"

"Of course I remember!" She snapped. "That was absolutely humiliating! Something I'll not likely forget until the end of my days."

"Then why do you continue to put yourself through it? The only way we'll get past this is if you start grieving for the child we've already lost!"

Her eyes went wide with disbelief for a brief second before they hardened. She abruptly turned from his arms and pulled a few more toys from the bin. James stared at her in astonishment before a quiet scoff escaped his lips and he turned away, suitably upset.

As he bent to pick up the discarded unicorn, Lily muttered, "I've got to finish this basket," she bustled around, squeezing more toys in. "Almost finished, it's somewhat decent. And grab your old cloak, would you?"

James glanced over his shoulder. "What cloak?" He curtly replied.

Lily's eyebrow arched as she sorted the gifts. "The one your father gave you. You're still not using that, are you? I've been meaning to give that away." Harry knew from the way that James had suddenly froze, that they were about to have a mighty row.

"ARE YOU MAD?" Lily and the boys flinched at James' shout. "Give my cloak — mind, my Invisibility Cloak — away? Have you finally lost it?"

The witch scowled, her hands planting themselves on her hips. "It's not like you're using it. Besides, it'd make a great gift for—"

"Kaltagonus?" he hissed, his face scrunching in anger. Lily's mouth thinned as James kicked at the table. "Listen to me," his rage bubbled just under the surface as he stalked to the redheaded witch. "I will not give some ... stranger boy a priceless heirloom that's been in my family for four generations! The cloak stays."

Lily spluttered in disapproval. "He is not some stranger boy!"

"Well, he isn't my son, that's for sure!" He erupted. Harry felt a slight pang at his words. Lily's eyebrows lowered in anger. "For the love of Merlin: he is not our child! He'll never be our child! Why can't you see that? Lily, the baby is gone!"

Harry could just see, behind the stubbornness and conviction in those green eyes so much like his, there was sadness,

understanding, and resistance to the truth. His mother's eyes became glassy as she watched her husband come apart at the seams.

"Why, Lily?" James' voice fell to a despairing whisper, his hands twisting the stuffed unicorn in his grasp. "Why do you keep tormenting yourself? Tormenting us? No other baby can ever replace our lost child; certainly don't try to substitute it with one of Athena's." Lily swallowed, rubbing her arms for comfort. "Because one of these days, you'll find yourself hurt far worse in the long run; and I myself cannot say that you wouldn't deserve it."

Stunned silence hung in the sitting room as James' words weighed on everyone. Harry knew his father was right. While he sympathized with his mother, he couldn't see how she'd get claim on Kaltagonus without being branded as mad. Though it seemed she had no response to James' accusations, the chime of the doorbell interrupted their argument. Throwing his wife an unhappy look, James dropped the stuffed unicorn and moved to the small foyer.

He opened the door with a half-hearted, "Hullo," catching an armful of baby as their guests greeted him in the same cheerless manner. The Celestial family piled into the sitting room plastering smiles to their faces as an enthusiastic Lily met them halfway. "I do hope you were not waiting for us long?" Athena inquired, automatically handing a bundle of green blankets over to Lily. Harry snorted at Spiridon's dark scowl.

"Oh, not at all," Lily easily lied, hurriedly unraveling the cover around Kaltagonus, who cooed gratefully. Her eyes briefly flitted to the chair sat in front of the window. "We barely noticed."

"Hmph." Spiridon quietly objected as his eyes had followed hers to the window. Athena and Spiridon sat in the same squashy armchairs while Lily took the sofa. James remained standing, gently rocking Nikola with a blank expression.

"I'll bring the tea out in a moment — "

"Really, Lily, do not exert yourself." Athena insisted.

"I have gifts," Lily eagerly announced, balancing the baby under one arm as she levitated the basket with her wand. It floated on the table,

settling over the evening paper. "I didn't think we needed all of this, so. . . ."

Athena's eyes glittered compassionately. "It's lovely, thank you. But I'm sure you will have need of it in the future," she warmly smiled. "In fact, I cannot wait until you have a little one, Lily."

Harry frowned as his mother drew baby Kaltagonus unconsciously closer. "Yes." In the background, he could see both Spiridon and James seething in silence. Lily's bright eyes fleetingly sought out James before they landed on the blue-eyed Cherub. "He's rather sedate tonight."

"Aren't you keen?" Spiridon briskly snapped. Athena glared at the floor near his feet, but said nothing.

"And my," Lily forced a chuckle, "this is a lovely blanket. I haven't seen it before." She fingered the article contemplatively.

"Surprising." The General mumbled. He raised an eyebrow as James rigidly sat beside Lily on the couch. "It was a gift from Severus." James scoffed incredulously, grabbing a handful of the blanket. He rubbed his thumb over the smooth material and sneered.

"Of course: Slytherin green," he snorted. "And who knew? Snivellus has expensive taste." Spiridon pursed his lips, no doubt to keep from saying something nasty. His resolve was steadily crumbling when a sudden smirk graced James' face. "Some godfather he is," he reproached as he held up the piece of fabric with a shiny silver 'L' embroidered in one corner. "Doesn't Kaltagonus begin with a 'K'?"

Spiridon visibly prickled. "It's for Kaltagonus' middle name, Lucien."

"Don't remind me," the elder Being moaned into his hands.

"Severus often calls him that. I suppose he was quite proud to discover we named our son after him," stated the General smugly. James glowered, his face red and properly censured. His eyes fell back to the blanket, and he rubbed his thumb over it again with a furrowed brow.

"And there are charms and protective spells weaved in this."

The dark-haired Being nodded with a proud smile. "Smart man, Severus. His Cushioning Charm woven in the fabric saved Kaltagonus from a nasty fall."

"Fall?" Lily exclaimed, her eyes widening. "What fall?" Her pitch was bordering on panic. Spiridon caught his gaffe and shared a glance with his wife.

Athena rolled the fabric of her robes between her fingers before she confessed, "We had some trouble at the palace before we arrived. Mystikos sent Hybrids to distract the guards and broke into the nursery—"

"Oh my God!" Lily gasped, at once sitting Kaltag on her lap as she began to check for injuries. "Are they all right? How did that monster get in! Was Kaltagonus hurt?"

Right away Harry noticed the indignant look on Spiridon's face. James looked to be at the end of his rope. "Lily, stop. You're taking this godmother thing to an extreme." He admonished in hushed tones.

"We checked them over and had the palace mender examine them just in case." Athena pointed out, as she looked on somewhat pained.

"There could have been something they overlooked! It's too dark in here; the candles aren't bright enough." She set one chubby arm down after examination and hastily uttered a charm that had small beads of light spewing from the end of her wand. In seconds, glass orbs like the ones found in St. Mungo's bobbed in the air. Silently, the other three adults looked on: one in disbelief, another in pity, and the last, in irritation.

"Lily—"

"Oh, thank heavens," the witch in question sighed, relieved. Kaltag returned her grin as he grabbed a fistful of her hair. "Not a scratch on him."

"Imagine that," Spiridon scornfully fumed. "The parents were telling the truth." For once, James didn't argue.

"How could he have gained access to their nursery? D'you not have guards? How could you let him fall? He could've killed them!" Lily rebuked.

"We're well aware of that!" Spiridon growled, ready to jump out of his seat if Starbuck hadn't been in his lap. "Furthermore, it's none of your concern."

Lily's eyes blazed. "How is this none of my concern?"

"Spiridon, don't—" The Entity's warning came too late.

"These are not your children!" Spiridon snarled, his expression tightening in fury. Something squeezed in Harry's chest as a defiant look crossed his mother's face before it cleared.

"Spiridon..."

"No, Athene! This needs to be said." He irritably cut in, turning to Lily with an unwavering stare. "You cannot keep dragging us from our home to see our children. I am sorry, Lily: you have no claim to them."

"Oh, like you do!" Harry barked, glaring daggers at the General.

"I never said I did," Lily hissed back, scowling him.

"Actions speak louder than words." Spiridon callously delivered. "What gives you the right to assert that you can better protect my son?"

"Hey, she never asserted anything," James feebly defended.

"What's more," Spiridon continued, ignoring James completely, "I am becoming quite uncomfortable with you spending so much time with them. I am reasonably convinced my wife and I, as well as all of the palace guards, can protect our own children, I'll thank you very much!"

"Considering what's occurred this evening," Lily argued, holding the unflustered Cherub tighter. "I'd say your security needs a good looking-at. They don't seem equipped to handle children." As



Spiridon opened his mouth to spit curses at the infernal witch, a quiet voice broke through.

"Actually, I think you are quite right."

Everyone's attention slid to the pensive Entity of Intellect. Athena primly folded her hands on her knees. "While I am fond of the sentries, not one of them knows how to properly defend such precious quarry as our children. I ... I agree with Lily." Athena sent a small grin at the young witch, who eagerly returned it. Very slowly, her eyes floated to her husband, daring him to object.

Spiridon was nothing short of fuming.

He opened and shut his mouth several times to speak, making Harry smugly realize he was a stone's throw from blowing up. "Athene," the General equably began, clutching their son for control, "we have discussed this. We decided—"

"No," she shook her head, "You decided, dearest. I just chose to let you run off steam. You did have a rather taxing day. Perhaps your mind was weary and you lapsed in your judgment; it has been known to happen." Harry sniggered when Lily coughed to stifle a laugh, earning a glower from James and Spiridon.

"Athene—"

"I think having Lily watch over the children is a marvelous idea," she resumed, favoring the green-eyed witch with a smile and continuing to ignore the General. "She knows precisely how to handle them."

"Yes," spat Spiridon. "She's had a lot of practice with our own."

"Then it's settled," the Entity musically chimed, holding her hand in the air. "I allow the witch Lily Potter to watch over our children as often as she can until the sentinels at the Thunder King's residence can be correctly trained to handle such delicate cases."

"Athene." Spiridon's voice was low and unpromising. Still, she continued to pay him no heed. In Athena's palm suddenly shimmered her golden wand and she quickly pointed it out the window Lily had vigilantly sat by earlier. As if a wind had suddenly whipped into existence, the window flew open, the drapes fluttering

in an unfelt breeze and a sparkling coil of brown and jade light swirled through the air into the darkness. Harry had followed Kaltag to the window, trailed by the grown-ups as well, and they all watched the light seep into the forest floor and vanish. It all seemed rather anti-climactic as nothing happened. Harry even heard James (or was it Kaltag?) snort in contempt.

Then, a ghostly glow broke through the dirt and dead leaves, and a slight groaning of earth could be heard. Suddenly, shoots and branches burst through the ground, growing high, the structure bending and twisting, forming a sturdy bark. Branches sprouted twigs and twigs sprouted sharp green leaves until the tree was wider than it was tall.

When the olive tree stopped creaking, Athena instructed, "To see the children, you need but press your hand onto the impression on the bark," she pointed to what Harry deciphered was a carving of an owl, "and speak the words, Sé Athène. Quickly then, you must hold out your arm and my owl will appear to whisk you off directly to the corridor of the children's nursery. The maidservants will be informed upon our return." Harry could almost hear Spiridon gnashing his teeth. "I will advise you to keep your visits during the early evening. I shall be meeting with the Cabinet at nights to resume my duties in the coming weeks."

James looked rather uneasy. "I don't think—"

"Oh, yes, of course," Lily hastily consented, her eyes wide and her expression eager to test out the gift. James shot her an annoyed look.

"You're making a mistake—"

"It's a very generous gift, don't you think?" She butted in, clearly not wanting to hear his doubts. With narrowed eyes, the dark-haired wizard remained silent. "Thank you, so much, Athena. This truly means a lot to me." She gratefully replied, sharing a one-armed hug with the Entity. "I promise, I won't abuse this privilege."

Both women were immune to the death glares their husbands were sending them. Harry mused had Spiridon not had Starbuck to occupy his hands he would've demolished the tree barehanded. James looked like he would've entertained that notion, judging by

the scowls he was reserving for both Lily and Athena. This didn't go unnoticed by Spiridon.

Baby Kaltagonus broke the heartfelt mood, protesting being squashed between the women with a loud squeal. "Oh, not a very sentimental one, is he?" Joked Lily.

"And definitely not sensitive," the Paraffin sneered, folding his arms petulantly.

As they pulled apart, James' impassive face met Lily's exuberant one, and Harry could see the twinkle falter in her eyes. Her mouth twitched as her grin waned a little, but she turned away, flashing her disarming smile. James' mouth trembled somewhat in frustration before his expression cleared and he quickly handed off a finicky Nikola to Athena.

"Would you excuse me? We're long overdue for tea." His tone was brusque, which was to be expected considering what the Entity had just done in the face of his protests.

His eyes getting thinner, Spiridon's eyebrow arched and he saddled his wife with a mesmerized Starbuck, tailing after James into the next room. "Yes, since you both are so in tune with the welfare of the children, watch over our brood with their new guardian," he all but growled. "I shall help James set up the beverages."

No sooner than the words had escaped Spiridon's mouth, Harry felt an insistent pull to follow him to the kitchen. He and Kaltag were practically yanked down the short corridor through a wooden door where they huddled into a quaint, dim kitchen lit solely by the fireplace.

They were met with the sight of the hazel-eyed Gryffindor hunched over a tea set, glaring at the lively garden pattern. James briefly looked over his shoulder to see who'd followed him in and Harry saw the barely noticeable slump in his shoulders. Obviously, he wasn't expecting it to be Spiridon. "Your wife has gone too far." Were his words of welcome.

"Likewise," Spiridon drolly replied with a humorless smile. "Though, I sense the real threat is your wife."

James shot him a venomous look, crossing the room to set a cauldron full of water in the fire. "She means no harm."

"Does she, now?" Came the deadpanned response.

"Yes," James angrily frowned, stoking the flames and levitating more wood. "She's ... grieving."

A disbelieving snort erupted from Spiridon's throat as he studied a teacup. "Does wizards' grief always extend to seeking a replacement for that which was lost?" James's stature went rigid, his head dipping slightly between his sharp shoulders before he began raiding the cupboards. Spiridon, who perused the cup as he leaned on the counter, stared at the Marauder's back soberly. "It's obvious your wife covets what she can never have." Harry became indignant at the reminder.

"Likewise." James nastily returned as he unloaded a tin of teabags.

At this, Spiridon's confusion showed. "I'm sorry?" The sound of James' angry rummaging was all that was heard. "Are you angry with me?"

James paused, turning to the General with mock-amazement. "Wow. Muscle-heads aren't so dumb after all."

"What have I done to receive insult?" Spiridon asked, annoyed.

As James stared into the tin, he laughed mirthlessly. "What have you done, eh? You talk about 'coveting what you can't have', you have the nerve to talk to me like that?" He accused in quiet tones, going toe-to-toe with the General. His eyes glittered in rage. "Don't think I don't see what you're getting at: you're after my wife." Spiridon blinked. Hell, Harry blinked. "I don't know how it is on your little fantasy world in the sky, but here, we marry one woman, and the dishonorable ones steal wives, but I'm prepared to fight you if it comes down to it and ... are you laughing at me?" James hissed in disbelief.

He stared at the Being incredulously, who was shaking his head and chuckling darkly as he set the teacup down. "I am not after your wife."

"But when she was pregnant—"

"My wife was constantly with her," Spiridon clarified. "Considering the turmoil your society is in, rather than have two tragedies on our hands I decided to watch over them both, equally. You're welcome, by the way." James slightly deflated, but was still reasonably puffed up. He even now had a haughty look on his face that refused to openly acknowledge any errors on his part. "Regrettably, your wife suffered devastation but now she is looking in the wrong place to amend it, and you know this. She wants my son—"

"S'not your son." Harry tiredly muttered.

"—As her own. The more time she spends with my son, the more this situation gets out of control. This is not healthy, James! I barely get to see my own children."

The wizard burst in anger, "Yeah? Well, I haven't seen my Lily since your children were born!" He paused to throw up a Silencing Charm and tucked his wand back into his waistband, rounding on the Celestial. "D'you know she hasn't been herself since she met you? For weeks, all she went on about is you this, you that, 'the nerve of that brute!' And your constant hovering over her while pregnant didn't make things any better! Now, it's ten times worse when your wife indulges her and brings the kids round."

"That is not my problem," Spiridon smoothly replied to the incensed Gryffindor. "I will see to my wife, but it is your duty as a husband to put your foot down. I can bar her from seeing the children, but it won't stop her," the General stared down at the spectacled wizard. "You put a stop to her coming, keep her from that tree, or I will."

"And how would I do that?" Spat James, glaring at the tea service. "Chain her somewhere in the house? Block her Apparation capabilities? Bind her magic? You don't know Lily."

A severe look passed Spiridon's face. Harry knew neither of them would like what he had to say next. "Or, it would be easier to just give her what she wants."

James' brow furrowed as he finally met the Being's gaze. "And what would that be?"

"What else?" Spiridon casually remarked, meeting the stare evenly. "Give her a child."

James' face contorted in rage. "You insensitive git! You speak as if that would make her well, having a child so soon after! How dare you—!"

"I will dare because those are my children out there," Spiridon vaguely pointed in the direction of the sitting room. "And your wife is coming between my family so she can feed her obsession. Now I implore you as a friend, and as a father," the General heavily breathed, "Give her what she wants. And yes, I understand no child can replace the one you lost—though Lily sees it differently—but it will help you move on. The sooner she is with your child, the sooner she forgets about mine."

"You don't want to see me anymore than you already do and the same bodes for me, as well. I almost feel as if I've been part of your marriage for as long as you've been part of mine." James visibly bristled at the insinuation. His eyes leapt over to the General as he drew closer, practically breathing down his neck. Threateningly, Spiridon whispered, "I'm warning you now, if you don't take care of this, I will." His dark eyes glittered with quiet promise.

Narrowing his eyes, James slowly turned to look at the Being suspiciously. "What's that supposed to mean?" His tone was as low and menacing as the General's had been.

Wordlessly, Spiridon reached for the waistband of James' trousers, grabbing hold of his wand. As James began to sputter in annoyance, he casually flicked the wand at the cauldron in the fire, handing James' wand back as they watched smoke excitedly pour from the pot. Spiridon left the wizard to stare at the smoking pot in confusion, dragging an annoyed Harry and Kaltag with him.

They were hauled back into the sitting room, where Athena balanced two babies as Lily doted over her green bundle. Without warning, Spiridon snatched Kaltagonus from her arms and held him aloft, smiling into the disappointed (or glaring, if babies could glare) face of the baby. "James has need of you in the kitchen," he indifferently stated. "Apparently, I'm so terrible, I could burn water."

Lily's face dropped its reverential look in favor of a discontented one. "Oh," she sadly answered. "I should have known he'd do a botch job of it. Will you...?"

"I think I know my own son," Spiridon openly sneered. Harry couldn't quite put his finger on why Lily looked that way, as he couldn't identify her expression. Harry almost expected to feel a pull behind his navel to drag him off to the kitchen, but it never came. He would have liked to see the conversation between his parents, but when Lily disappeared down the corridor and Athena turned dark eyes on her husband, he knew there was something more important to be seen.

"Your cruelty was uncalled for."

"My cruelty was necessary," Spiridon coldly returned, playing with Kaltag's hands. "Especially if you continue to contradict me and goad her."

"I told you before," Athena frostily countered. "She needs—"

"Her husband and her own child," he cut her off with a mild glare. "James feels the same as I. He wants her to stop seeing the children before this goes too far—but it already has gone too far."

Athena's eyebrows knit together angrily. "What have you done?"

"What should have been done a long time ago." Spiridon growled, running his fingers through the baby's hair. "I'm trying to protect this family, and I wish you would see that. It's for his own good."

"She's his godmother!"

"He needs no godmother! Specifically, one like her!"

"She's—"

"Healing?" He derisively rounded on her. "Open your eyes! This IS NOT how someone heals, Athene! This isn't beneficial to her in any way! She already thinks Kaltagonus is hers," Spiridon quietly hissed, even as Athena scoffed. "Sooner or later, she will overstep her boundaries and we will wake up to find our children stolen from their cots! And we would know exactly where to find them!"

"Spiridon," Athena mockingly laughed as she comfortably arranged the twins. "Why, that's completely unfathomable."

SMASH!

Everyone's eyes jerked toward the doorway at the sound of shattering glass. A broken teacup lay at Lily's feet, the spray of ceramic powder just settling as she stared at the Celestials, wide-eyed. "Good heavens, Lily! Are you all right?" Athena worriedly inquired. Instead of answering, Lily continued to stand there, the tea service tilting at a dangerous angle in her ever-slackening hands, her eyes as large as the orbs floating near the ceiling.

Spiridon's gaze grew dim. "Lily?" He cautiously tried.

Lily's large emerald eyes were unblinking. "What ... did you say?" They strained to hear her.

"I—"

"What's all the fuss, then?" James bounded into the room, carrying a plate of tea biscuits. He quickly took in everyone's expressions before following their gaze to the broken cup. Frowning, he set the platter on the table and pried the tray from Lily's flaccid hands. "It's not anything to lose sleep over, it can be salvaged. A quick Reparo should do the job, but I'll make sure there're no shards of glass lying in wait, as well. Reparo! See? Fine." He clapped his hands together for show (not that anyone was paying attention) and glanced at the ceiling. "And I'll just need some light for ... oh, that one's defective. Lily, could you ... Lily?"

The messy-haired wizard's brow furrowed, as did Lily's, but for an entirely different reason, it seemed. "You," she was staring at Spiridon, "you said—"

"Oh, Lily," Athena sympathetically replied. "He truly did not mean it, he was just upset, is all."

James turned an annoyed look to Spiridon. "What'd you do now?" Spiridon had the nerve to look affronted.

"It is obvious your wife has—"



"Spiridon..."

"I'd mind your tone if I were you, Celestial or not," James threatened the General. "I'll not have you disrespecting my wife in our home." Lily stared at the ceiling critically, looking completely unaware of the turmoil around her.

"And I refuse to have your wife invading my home." Spiridon sent back.

"Why, you ingrate—!"

"Stop this at once!" Athena fruitlessly ordered.

"You unimaginable bastard! You've been nothing but rude and unaccommodating to us since we've met you!" James shouted, red in the face.

"Ah! And the pot calls the kettle black," Spiridon coolly returned.

Harry had never seen someone's face turn this many shades of red since his Uncle Vernon last summer. His father was near foaming at the mouth, shaking with rage when he finally exploded.

"You are unbelievable! I've tolerated you for too long and tonight, it all ends! Never have I been disgraced in my own home, sir! Never! And I will not now, nor will I ever endure any more of your insults towards me, or my wife, do you understand? I don't care what family you come from or who you know, I, James Potter, will not put up with any more of your foul, seething, ridiculous, inconceivable—"

"Unfathomable."

"Unfathomable, unfriendly, superci—uh, unfathomable?" James paused his tirade long enough to stare at his wife in bewilderment. Harry stood straighter on the spot. Unfathomable? His heart was skipping beats in excitement.

All the occupants in the room, even the children were staring at Lily, whose gaze was transfixed by the orbs floating along the ceiling. She seemed drawn to one in particular, one that gave a sort of a dangerous wobble as if it were about to take a dive and smash any

minute. As she eyed the orb, Harry's gaze watched the room at large: Athena and James blinked, confused. Kaltag the elder was at a loss for words and they were all silent, mesmerized by the unsteady sphere of light.

Only Harry seemed to notice the peculiarly wide smile on baby Kaltag's face, staring at Lily in what could be an unusually relieved expression.

Only Harry watched as Lily's eyes lowered to the baby's, realization and understanding gleaming in her deep green eyes; he listened to the infant's telling giggle.

Only Harry noted his mother's dawning gaze rising to meet the General's dark, even nervous, eyes, widening in their own condemnation. Lily's eyes darted to the distracted Entity and Harry swore he saw Spiridon flinch. Lily's mouth formed a thin, determined line that conveyed one single message:

I know.

Harry smirked as Spiridon looked like he'd just been punched in the gut. Hard.

ooooo

(Olympos, the Nursery belonging to Pallas Athene at O Oíkos Tōn Díos (The House of Zeus). Friday, November 2, 1979. 9:33 PM.)

It was dark, night, when the memory landed them in the nursery again. The only source of light visible was the shadows dancing underneath the doorway from the illuminated corridor. Harry could barely distinguish the outlines of the triplets' cradles in the gloom.

"As you have gleaned from the previous memory," Harry cringed as Calchas' voice boomed in his ears, "Lily Potter discovered the basis of truth behind her miscarriage. Since that night, Lily Potter demanded to see the child Golradir almost daily, secure in the knowledge that she had finally found her missing child. However, her plans to reunite with him were not the will of the Fates."

The connection closed rather abruptly, and Harry was left to wait for the memory to take place. He sincerely hoped this was not another

of Mystikos' attacks, and by the way Kaltagonus was staring at the lightly billowing gossamer curtains he knew the prefect did, too.

The boys didn't have to wait long as a strip of light spilled onto the floors, widening as the bedroom door was slowly pushed open. Harry faintly heard a hoot from the doorway before a sudden movement swooped through him, darting for the window. Before the owl could properly fly into the muggy evening, it disappeared quietly in a shower of gold.

As the light coming from the corridor lessened, Harry caught a brief flash of red hair; it was his mother. She silently closed the door and Harry followed her tiptoeing shape across the room to the line of matching cribs. But before she got within reaching distance of the babies, an icy voice froze her in her tracks, startling both Harry and Kaltagonus.

"I was wondering when you would show up, Lily Potter."

Harry's neck whipped in the direction of the voice, the voice he'd known since the beginning of summer, the voice he'd come to respect and now despise, making out Spiridon's silhouette in the shade. He was standing by a window partially hidden by a thick curtain, his back to them. At the sound of his voice, a candle flicked to life on a table in the corner, barely able to light up one wall but enough to cast them into ominous shadows.

Harry could make out the expression of anger and cool determination on his mother's face. "You and I have unfinished business."

"Of that, I'm sure." Spiridon returned, his tone neutral. "He's in the first cradle. But of course, you'd know that. You've been here every night, the matron tells me. He's waiting for you."

At this, Harry blinked in confusion. He had given up? So soon? But then why hadn't he and Kaltagonus known each other? Why hadn't they grown up together?

Lily rushed to the first cradle and immediately smiled, staring down at the wide-awake babe shrouded in a green blanket. "Hello," she whispered, awestruck and sniffling. "Be honest: he's my son, isn't he?"

Harry's chest tightened in anticipation. He knew he'd seen the transferal with his own eyes and even heard the Quintessence say Kaltagonus was the infant, but some part of him, some nagging aspect of his being needed to know. Needed to hear, once and for all, the truth.

"Yes." Spiridon quietly confirmed. "He's yours."

The spasm in his chest eased as his mother let out a triumphant, emotional laugh. "You're mine," she whispered, leaning over the crib to lay an audible kiss on the giggling Cherub. "You're mine." Harry could've caught a thousand snitches and he wouldn't have felt this happy. A brother. It was official: he actually had a brother! Beside him, Kaltagonus paled with the confirmation, but otherwise continued to survey the incident with an impassive façade.

"I can't say I'm surprised to see you here without ... the husband." The Being spoke with mild distaste.

Lily's cheeks colored slightly as she smoothed the hair on Kaltag's head. "I told him Molly Weasley wanted to speak to me at Order headquarters."

A deep chuckle came from the Celestial. "Deceptive, already. Lying to your spouse to nourish your fixation. Classic symptoms of fanaticism and mania." Lily glared daggers at his back. "Just out of curiosity, when did you figure it out?" Spiridon inquired.

Toying with the grinning child's outstretched hands, Lily answered, "The day the palace was attacked. Athena had said 'unfathomable', and that, along with the glow-spheres I'd conjured, triggered something. It all made sense suddenly." She paused to tuck the blankets securely around him as a breeze filtered in. The General remained in his stiff position at the window. "Halloween, you were at the museum, not because you'd heard the attack from shopping—clever setup, by the way; the Aurors later told us the Death Eaters had Obliviated the shopkeeper and raided the store after the heist. Very curious. You were the attack." She threw a glare over her shoulder at his back. "You came to get the Unfathomable for whatever reason."

Spiridon shifted ever so slightly. "The reason is laying in that cot."

Lily briefly turned to give the man a suspicious look, but instead returned to her son and her story. "And my pregnancy, you were always around. Not a day went by that I didn't see you or thought I saw you skulking being a pillar or a newspaper. You joined the Order just to watch me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And ... and the night, I lost..." the red-haired witch stopped, her face replacing its extreme joy with hollow sadness faster than Harry could say 'Quidditch'. He watched her close her eyes and swallow, obviously hurt. "That was the last time I remembered seeing you. I didn't see you again until the presentation, but I'd seen Athena several times. After that, you were so adamant to keep him away from me, even as I felt drawn to him, connected." Spiridon remained quiet. "You could never leave me alone with him, not once. But everything clicked that night. I'd realized everything you had done, from every lie you spoke to the suspicious stares on every visit. I knew you were a liar and a fraud. It all makes sense now."

There was a brief stint in conversation, broken only by Kaltagonus' gleeful noises. Finally, Spiridon stated, impressed, "Clever girl, Mrs. Potter."

Lily frowned at the compliment, and she asked the one question Harry so desperately wanted solved, the one he'd give all the Galleons in the world to have answered. "Why?"

"For your protection," Spiridon replied without hesitation. "You have no idea what he would have done to you had I left him unsupervised." If Lily was puzzled, she didn't show it. "You say you feel a pull, an insistent yearning to be with him always: that's not motherly intuition, Lily Potter. That's mind control, an Imperius Curse with longer lasting effects, ultimately, resulting in your loss of sanity. I couldn't leave him to do that to you."

"But you left him to do that to your wife?" Lily harshly reprimanded, scowling darkly.

"He has no connection with Athena, save for nurturing; thus, he cannot control her until he becomes much older. But your maternal

connection with him," Spiridon shook his head slowly. "The more he sees you, the more control he wields over your actions. You would have been nothing more than his mindless minion by the time he'd learn how to walk."

"I don't understand all of this," Lily began after a stretch of tense silence, "and I don't know the extent of your lies or worse, whether you're even telling the truth or not. But I don't think I would like to know the rest."

"Then you are not as clever as I thought." Spiridon sniffed. Harry seriously wanted to slap the Celestial around with a beater's bat.

"All I know is you stole my child," she continued with conviction, "trying to pass him off as your own, and now..." a moment of confusion overtook her before she shook her head. "You're just ... giving him back to me? Without argument?"

Harry was unnerved by the chuckle that thundered from Spiridon's chest. The man was so amused (though no one found it funny) he unclasped his arms and threw his head back, deep guffaws spilling from his mouth. Harry felt as insulted as his mother looked. "Oh, of course not, silly girl," he stated between his rumbling laughter. "I am merely allowing you to see him as your son: one last time."

No sooner than the words had left his mouth, Lily's wand was in hand and steadily aimed at the Being's back. "I'll die before I leave him with you!" She furiously avowed.

Spiridon carelessly shrugged. "Your choice." He, too, spun on his heel rapidly and Harry's eyes nearly burst out of his sockets when he saw what the General was holding.

In place of his sword, Spiridon had a wand. A long one like Athena's, only black.

Like the long black rod the stranger at the school had used on him.

Lily faltered at the sight of it. "Where did you get that?"

"Come now, Mrs. Potter," Spiridon derisively chimed, stepping out of the darkness. "You have your secrets and I have mine."

"Only three Celestials are supposed to have wands!"

"Well then, I suppose it's four now, isn't it?" He dryly stated with a cynical look.

Lily's brow wrinkled thoughtfully. "Athena doesn't know about this, does she?"

The General's mouth pressed a thin line. "What my wife doesn't know won't hurt her."

"Oh, my God," Lily exhaled. "You haven't told her a thing, have you?"

"Obviously." Spiridon replied as if he were Snape spitting acid at first years. Now Harry could see why the men were friends: both traitors, evil, and hell-bent on destroying other peoples' lives.

Glaring daggers at him, Lily kept her wand aloft. "No matter. It still won't stop me from taking him with me."

His dark blue eyes glittered with grim finality. "I cannot have you impede the future, Lily Potter." Lily placed a hand on Kaltagonus' railing in blatant defense. Harry was dimly aware of the hard casings now glinting on Starbuck and Nikola's cribs. "For your safety, your son must not go with you; I can only promise that should you have children, I will not let their lives pass without them knowing each other."

"Your promises mean nothing to me!" Lily snidely bit out. "What honor is there among thieves?"

"Step away from the cradle, Lily."

Lily's hand tightened on the railing. "You will not take my son from me."

"Oh, but I must," the General tried to reason. Harry could only watch as the two of them faced off, feeling defenseless as he could not help. "Listen to me: your life is better without him."

"How can you say that? What is life worth living if I can't have my child?" the redhead snarled, brandishing her wand threateningly.

Baby Kaltagonus seemed to whimper behind her in agreement. Her eyes flashed menacingly as her scowl deepened most unnaturally, almost as if she were under Golradir's influence again. "I will take my son home, where he rightfully belongs, and I will kill you if you try to stop me."

"Lily," whispered the General breathlessly. "Can you not see what he is doing? Can you not feel his control? He's manipulating you into what you are not. You are a smart girl. You know, deep down, that I must do this. In time, you will see this was all for your benefit."

Lily bared her teeth, growling, "You had no right," she whispered dangerously. "You had no right!"

Spiridon adopted a calm expression. "I know you're upset right now—"

"Upset? Upset? Upset was my learning the truth weeks ago! Upset is what I feel knowing my own husband doesn't believe me!" Harry thought back to his dream from several nights ago. So this was it. This was what it was all about. He felt a torrent of emotions swell inside as his mother persisted. "No, I am beyond upset. I want to kill you right now for taking what's mine!"

"Now, Lily, please don't — "

"Do anything rash? Hasty?" His mother spat. "You'd want that, wouldn't you? Because it'd only solidify what you've all been saying for months now: That I'm crazy!"

The Celestial slowly shook his head; he didn't look the least bit convincing. "We've not — "

"I'm not crazy and we both know it!" She was gripping the handrail so hard her knuckles were white. Baby Kaltagonus had freed his hands and now his small fists were thrashing about, hitting the cradle bars and garnering both adults' attention. Lily, her wand still at the ready, leaned over the infant with a brilliant smile before it slowly drained from her face. "What you did was ... unforgivable." Her face then darkened with resolution. "And when we get out of here, I'll see to it that you rot in Azkaban, you thief!"



The contemptible Being snorted. "That won't happen. No justice system would believe your words." The General sneered. "You said it yourself: everyone thinks you're crazy. You are not going anywhere."

Lily raised her chin defiantly, pursing her lips in a thin, McGonagall-like fashion. "We're leaving tonight." She decisively stated. "Either you let us by," her wand twitched menacingly, "or I will kill you."

The General derisively chuckled. "You wouldn't do it."

Lily's eyebrow challengingly arched. "Watch me."

Spiridon's brow lowered sinisterly. "You are not leaving."

"I'd like to see you try and stop us." Lily curled her fingers into a fist, glowering at her hand. "I can't believe you'd do this. I thought. . . ." She shook her head and glared. "I trusted you."

Spiridon followed with an empty laugh. "That was your first mistake. I am a guardian." He callously admitted. "I trust no one, and I do what is required of me. Even if it meant gaining your trust simply for the will of fortune to succeed; even if that mean hurting you in the worst way imaginable." Lily's eyes flashed in pain and betrayal. "So, Lily Potter, you are not going anywhere. Don't make me take drastic measures, Lily. I do not want to do this, so don't force me. Step away."

She glared in response, looking ready to pounce as the Cherub behind her grizzled. "What will you do if I don't? Kill me?"

"I don't want to." He confessed.

"You already have!" She shouted, setting Nikola and Starbuck to cry. "We're going."

"You go; he stays."

"Where I go, he goes," Lily snarled. "He knows me, he knows. I don't know how, but he does."

"Mother's intuition?" The Being scorned.

"Step aside, and I will not report you to the Aurors if you let me take my son to where he belongs." She negotiated. Harry thought she was better than he would ever be; if it were him, he'd hex first and ask questions later.

Spiridon's eyes narrowed. "No, you are not." Harry's eyes shot back and forth between the two, expecting a spectacular duel to occur after their intense staring match. Lily looked fierce and terrible, and fire danced in her eyes; he could almost see plans forming behind her eyes and spells whizzing through her mind. She wasn't about to give up without a fight.

A severe look passed her face and her hand gripped the cradle with a silent oath.

"You ... can't ... stop me."

She leveled her wand at Spiridon, ready to curse him at any sudden movement. The Being, Harry noted, appeared reluctant, as if he were surrendering. His hold on his wand relaxed a bit, and it even dipped lower, nearly aiming elsewhere. Spiridon's eyes briefly flitted to the shiny safeguards on Starbuck and Nikola's cribs, housing the bawling babies protectively within them. The General's lips parted as if he were about to speak, to even apologize maybe. His eyes rose to meet Lily's stubborn emeralds with what Harry guessed to be remorse.

Instead, all that he could see were shadows.

"Obliviate!"

"NO!" Harry shouted as his mother's eyes became vacant, her face eased of its ferocity and her wand arm fell limp, her wand clattering to the floor. Kaltagonus looked sick as Spiridon marched up to her and retrieved her wand, a grimace on his face but his relief evident. Harry wanted to wipe that look off of his face permanently. But it was no matter. His mother's memory was likely gone, and it was obvious she never remembered the truth about Kaltagonus before her death.

He watched with growing anger as the dark-haired Being murmured a foreign spell, and a thick golden rope materialized from Lily, linking both the witch and the fussing Cherub in the cradle. With another whisper of words, Harry bristled when his mother jerked, not coming

out of her vacuous state, and Spiridon's black wand was directing the long golden vine from what appeared to be her abdomen. As more and more of the rope emerged, Harry spied it splitting off to several different branches until finally, what looked like an oak tree bereft of its leaves was pulled out of his mother. Spiridon frowned deeply at the coil, and a quick flick of his wrist snapped the rope in half, leaving it to blacken and disappear.

Staring down his nose at the foul-faced Cherub, Spiridon stated, "There. That should put an end to the wicked hold you have on her." Harry's eyes narrowed when the baby's gaze seemed to flash golden in the candlelight.

At last, Spiridon faced Lily with a somber look. Harry didn't think he deserved to look that way; it wasn't right. Who was he to even appear regretful after all that he had done? He should have been rotting in Azkaban with the other criminals!

Spiridon fixed his eyes on the green-eyed witch, still emotionless. "I am sorry it has come to this, but I want you to know it had to be done." He justified. Harry wanted to rip out his tongue and stomp on it. The bastard didn't deserve to be sorry! The General's face went from apologetic to grim as he spoke his next words.

"You will forget everything you have ever suspected of me, of Athene my innocent, and of my son, Kaltagonus. You know only that we are friends, Order members, and have shared in your tragedy. The incessant visiting as well as the badgering must cease; you will remain the unofficial godmother to my firstborn and no more.

"Lastly, I want you to grieve, Lily Potter, with your husband, and seek to fill that void with my child no more. Go home, lay with your husband, make your child and forget mine." Spiridon advised before he waved his wand and conjured a glass of what looked to be water, tucked Lily's wand in her robes, hid his own out of sight and waited.

They didn't have to wait long; Lily began to stir, blinking her eyes in confusion as she took in her surroundings. Harry hoped she remembered something, a sliver, even a tidbit of information: anything to recall Spiridon's duplicity.

Alas, her eyes settled on the cradle behind her with the fussing infant. Harry felt the beginnings of a smile as her brow furrowed and

she stared at the child curiously. He could feel the hundreds of Golden Snitches fluttering wildly in his stomach. But they dropped like lumps of ice as her eyes drew blank and she turned away.

She didn't know. That bastard had won.

"Spiridon?" She asked, bewildered. "What ... why am I here?"

The Celestial offered her an empty smile. "You wanted to visit the children." He gestured to the all the cradles, including the twins, whose shields had fallen.

"Oh," Lily eyed each triplet with a half-hearted smile, her anguish evident. Harry seriously wanted to throttle Spiridon for causing her so much pain. "They're beautiful."

"Thank you." He handed her the glass of water, which she gratefully accepted and drank.

"So help me God, Merlin and Zeus, if you poison her..." Harry warned, just dying for another reason to torture and kill the git.

Lily made a face and blandly smiled. "The water. It has a peculiar taste. Most ... piquant."

"It's a blend of Welsh paperwhites and rare orange blossom water," the revolting Celestial explained. "It has calming properties." Lily's eyes glimmered briefly in puzzlement as she processed the information, but her eyes were emptied of emotion once again.

"Welsh paperwhites and orange blossoms? That can't be right." Harry's attention veered to the Paraffin, whose face, once stricken with grief, was now screwed up in concentration. "Welsh paperwhites aren't calming they're ... narcissi! Narcissus is an aphrodisiac! And orange blossoms, orange blossoms..." he snapped his fingers frantically trying to remember.

"Come on!" Harry urged. "You'd remember this! You're the male Hermione for God's sake!"

"Uh," Kaltag shook his head. "I know this. Okay, what was that stupid limerick? 'In disorder 'twixt nasturtium and red bloss'm, oaks

so brave fought oleanders wary, and peaceful olives were naught to calm—"

"This is supposed to help you remember something?" Harry wryly remarked.

"—The docile orchids resounded "maybe" and..." Kaltag's eyes comically widened. "Son of a—!" Harry madly and ineffectively gestured as Kaltag gaped at the adults. "And bloom'd in fall, with orange blossom's baby'. It's a fertility potion! But ... forcing a fertility potion on someone causes the child and its parents ... to be ... cursed."

"Precisely." Someone's—Odysseus?—pleased voice echoed in Harry's head.

Harry's mouth fell open in understanding.

Slowly she drank, avoiding all eye contact with the cradles and looking slightly dazed as she finished. Spiridon set aside the glass and patiently stood by, waiting for Lily to regain her bearings. "I ... I don't really remember why I'm here. Did Athena—?"

"She's meeting with the Cabinet tonight. You remember: she told you yesterday."

Lily's brow crumpled. "I was here yesterday? Then why—?" Suddenly, her eyes widened and she gasped, covering her mouth with a hand. "Oh, dear! Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"WHAT?" Harry screeched. What was she apologizing for? It's not like she's just raped the bastard's mind of the truth!

"I've been absolutely appalling! I'm so sorry for my horrendous behavior." She contritely expressed, wincing at her thoughts. "I've been such a bother, and had no basis to make those demands. I promise it won't happen again." Her eyes watered slightly from exhaustion, and she ran a hand through her hair. "I'm terribly sorry for everything. You've put up with a lot of my mess, and I can't apologize enough."

"It's all right, Lily."

"I mean, I just barged into your home in the middle of the night—"

"It's fine."

"And-and-and James! I've practically pushed him aside all this time!" She sounded aghast, but at the mention of the man's name, her eyes seemed to expand a bit and her cheeks grew rosy. Snapping her rambling jaw shut, Lily turned to Spiridon and quietly stated, "But I'm going to amend it."

Spiridon's eyes glittered with approval. "Yes. You do that, Lily Potter." The Celestial nodded with a slight smirk. "You do that."

Nodding rather numbly, Lily bade him good night, ignoring the crying redheaded Cherub and exited the nursery.

As soon as the door was shut behind her, Spiridon advanced on the teary-eyed tot's cradle and leaned over, a dark expression crossing his face. "Listen up, Golradir, and listen well," he coldly began. "It ends now. You've ruined enough lives and you almost took Lily Potter's freedom. No more plans, because I know you have been plotting in that small head of yours. You've caused enough damage, and I will not let you take my son from me again. It ends tonight."

As Harry and Kaltag were whisked out of sight, he saw the gold eyes staring back at Spiridon with such malevolence. And Harry really couldn't blame him, especially now that he'd learned the truth.

His life had been damned because of Spiridon Smythe.

oooooooooooo

(Tóra (Gr.: Τώρα) means 'now' in Greek.)

A/N: Thanks for reading! Now how about reviewing? Please? Please? I'll give you my brother-in-law's dog! He's adorable (but creepy)! But he absolutely loves feedback!

A/N 2: I looked up flower meanings today and discovered what they meant. Now you know what they mean. Go out and impress someone today. :)

A/N 3: For future reference (because you will see him again), and because I remember way back when someone wanted to know how I pronounced my character names, Markés is pronounced like 'Marcus', only without the UHH of Mar-KUHHSS (I say MarKESS, but tomato, tomahto).

## Chapter Thirty-Three: Purgo Memoria, Part V

Kaltag had a plagued look about him as the Quintessence swam back into view. His skin looked rather gray, and his eyes were wide with what Harry could only describe as astonishment. All in all, he looked just as Harry felt.

"Speechless, boy?" The boys' eyes glided to the smirking Mycenaean. "A feat thought impossible until now."

"Agamemnon," Warned Andromache, her tone so hostile it was almost frightening. Appearing to have sensed it as well, the dark-haired king wisely backed down. "Kaltagonus, are you all right?" She turned and asked once she was sure her glare kept Agamemnon in his place.

The Being's eyes lazily drifted to the smoke and shadows vacillating wildly between the trees. Though his face was carefully blank, Harry could easily see a torrent of emotion welled in his blue eyes. Confusion, anger, betrayal, and grief were only the tip of the iceberg.

"Kaltagonus, are you well to continue?" Penelope inquired as the Quintessence stared at the redhead, some in mild concern, others in impatience (three guesses who).

Harry bristled at the implication. How could anyone be well after they had just learned their entire life was based on a lie? That their mother was someone else and their supposed father orchestrated the whole thing? Harry was sure Kaltagonus would have himself committed after this.

But without feeling, Kaltagonus replied—to Harry's surprise and indignation, "Just go." He shook his head unemotionally, slowly, staring into the shadows. "Just ... go."

Amazingly, the Quintessence hesitated, darting quizzical glances to each other; Achilles' eyes furtively followed Kaltagonus' gaze to the smoky trees.

"Just go'? Are you mad?" Harry prickled with fury. "After what you just saw you—you—you—! That all you have to say? Just go?" He couldn't believe Kaltagonus was just going to ignore Spiridon's offense!



Grimly staring down at the expressionless Being, Calchas began, "From then on, Lily Potter was no longer a part of Golradir's life. With the bond broken and now one-sided, Lily Potter was free to continue her life the way she ought to have: of her own volition, free from restriction and control. She was now free to grieve for the loss she would never fully remember." Harry's blood boiled in rage. He would be sure to tell the whole world of Spiridon's treachery when he had the chance. Kaltagonus, however, remained impassive.

"What happened to Golradir?" he quietly asked.

"He went into a state of heightened dormancy." Hector answered. "He allowed you to retain control, be a child while he regrouped, lurking under your mind's surface." Kaltagonus nodded once, returning to stare at the darkness.

"Shortly thereafter, Harry Potter was born." Calchas continued. "We were afraid she might relapse with this birth, but thankfully Lily Potter remained ignorant as to the truth. Life for the Potters this time around, found them on better times."

"The same cannot be said for the goddess Athene's family," Odysseus carried. "Mystikos' attack was only the beginning. His October strike was followed by several, more vile and unthinkable as the years went by, in which you and the others witnessed the deaths of several guardians right before your young eyes. The goddess Athene and the General became increasingly worried, especially since Father Zeus was adamant you remain at the palace for protection."

"Where's the logic in staying in the same place that he attacks?" Kaltag questioned, his brow lightly wrinkled. "You're telling me Zeus practically handed us to Mystikos on a silver platter? Did he not want us to be protected?"

Odysseus shook his head. "He thought he was protecting you."

"Fat lot of help that turned out to be." Kaltag grumbled.

"His judgment reasoned that the closer you were to him, the lesser the attacks."

"The lesser the attacks, yes," Kaltag nodded, some of his old ire returning to his eyes. "But that didn't stop him from harassing us. Zeus is as much responsible for everything as—as . . . ." He trailed off, averting his gaze.

"The bastard? The arsehole? The prick? There's an entire list of names to choose from," Harry griped, crossing his arms.

Sensing the Being's affliction, Hector resumed. "Following the death of the Battalion's top warrior and the children's standing guardian, Athene and Spiridon could no longer stand the constant palace breaches."

"The event that set your current situation in motion is disturbing, at best." Calchas stated. "This may be a disquieting memory, but were there any other way—"

"Just show me," Kaltag snapped, sighing heavily. "It can't possibly be any worse than what I've already seen."

Harry swallowed deeply as a chilling smile stretched across Achilles' face. "As you wish."

Before the memory exited, Harry swore Spiridon would be the least of the Being's worries if the memory in any way made him lose his lunch.

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(Olympos, the Nursery belonging to Pallas Athene at O Oíkos Tōn Díos (The House of Zeus). Sunday, August 15, 1981. 7:37 PM.)

BOOM!

"AGAIN!"

"GET THIS DOOR OPEN NOW!"

"You heard the General! Move!"

"COME ON, MEN! HEAVE! HEAVE!"

"I can use my wand!"

"No! We cannot risk it! Stand aside!"

Harry barely had time to register they were once again in the palace before the chaos overwhelmed him. There were servants and infantrymen racing down each direction of the dark corridor, fanning out supposedly through the palace. The foreboding sound of clubs whistling through the air and swords clanging sharply could be heard corridors away. A foul stench hung in the air, a sickly sweet smell more sickly than it was sweet. There was an underlying scent of smoke and overcooked pork, but Harry was more alarmed at the sour taste of the air. It tasted almost metallic.

It tasted like blood.

The noise in the corridor jarred his hearing, from the orders shouted at the twenty-odd armor-clad soldiers to the wailing behind the doors. He vaguely noted Athena and her traitorous husband standing off to the side, watching as the company readied themselves in front of the doors, a thick log of wood hanging between them.

"On three, men!" Spiridon commanded, unsheathing his sword. "One..." the men crouched low. "Two..." They rhythmically breathed, sweat and dust and determination carved in their faces. "Three!" With a mighty heave, the soldiers roared their battled cry and rammed the set of doors.

BANG!

The doors crashed open, slapping against the walls with such force that they cracked. The first thing that caught Harry's eye was the sight of flames leaping up from a small pile on the double bed in the room. Following a number of exclamations, a few soldiers abandoned their posts at the battering ram and rushed into the darkness to put out the fire — the source of the rank stench — causing the children to cry harder when the only source of light was put out. A cool breeze swept across Harry's face and he saw the brief flash of light from Athena's wand before the torches around the room lit up.

"AAAARRRGH!"

Harry flinched at the bloodcurdling scream and spun in the direction of the noise. His jaw dropped.

Standing some three feet away from the toddlers' cots was a gaunt-faced, stunned soldier, covered in blood. Harry for a moment wondered where all the blood had come from since he remembered the man had looked fairly clean if not somewhat sullied out in the hallway. However, his question was answered when he noticed blood was dripping on the shocked warrior. With a knotted stomach, Harry's bottle green eyes slowly trailed from the man's traumatized expression upward to the source of horror. Harry thought his face would turn as green as his eyes.

There, suspended by rope in a cruel mock of a child's mobile was a thick, hairy, bloody leg ... attached to nothing else.

"Gods on high!" someone gasped. The leg was black and blue, as if the quarry had been beaten and even gnawed on before they were cleaved. Large contusions seemed to have erupted into hemorrhaged gashes, and Harry was sickened to note parts of the limb were quietly sizzling, the black patches of skin giving off a nauseating smell.

As someone pulled the stunned soldier away from the sight, Harry noticed few other parts — hands, the odd foot, an arm and a mismatched pair of hazel and brown eyeballs — also dangled from the ceiling, raining beads of scarlet on the aghast Battalion and the children. It was absolutely horrific.

But 'horrific' didn't quite seem adequate enough to describe it.

Blood painted the walls and columns in shiny crimson, most likely from the naked bodies — or rather, body parts — littering the nursery floor. Harry's eyes bulged out of his sockets when a soldier jumped ten feet in the air after crunching a sandaled foot, underfoot. Several men coughed as the musty smoke lingered, stinging Harry's nostrils and making his eyes tear from its strength. Harry counted three torsos, devoid of limbs and heads, mounted against each triplet's cot, symbols and crude words carved deeply into the battered flesh of each man. There was no doubt that the men were tortured before they were brutally killed.

"Oh ... oh, no," Daedelus breathed, his eyes roving over each torso. He slowly advanced, kneeling between two badly scorched trunks and ghosted his fingers on the branded rankings in their chests. "Colonels Alkibiades and Zelotes and ... and Lysander, sir." Spiridon squeezed his eyes shut and crossed the room with Athena, attempting to placate the wailing children. Well, Nikola and Starbuck were bawling; young Kaltagonus looked to be in extreme shock, thumb firmly planted in his mouth and staring at the bottom of his cradle. "They were doused in perfumes and oils to burn faster."

"How did he get in?" The General hissed, pressing sobbing Nikola's crimson and blonde head into his armor, away from the massacre.

"Hybrids, sir," Markés called from near the window, holding up some sort of weapon. "Likely through the windows and out into the night. Some of their blood is here as well."

"Never mind that," Athena frantically bade, gathering Starbuck in a clean blanket. "We need to get the children out of here: right now!"

With a curt nod, Spiridon accepted a blanket from a soldier and covered Nikola. "To your brother's forge: quickly." Athena nodded and made to leave with Starbuck. Almost as an afterthought Spiridon prompted, "Daedelus? Mind Kaltagonus, will you?"

"Yeah. Of—of course, sir." The Captain absently obeyed, averting his gaze from the smoking torsos and scrubbing his eyes under his helmet.

"Diomedes," Spiridon's sharp tone caused the man to recoil. With a solemn expression, Spiridon dropped a free hand on the Captain's shoulder, watching an air of defeat cross his young face. "Daedelus, I know they were our friends and brothers, I feel just as you do, but the time to grieve is not now. We need to get the children to safety. Be strong for them, please." He pleaded over the children's hiccupping and Battalion's shouts.

Vacantly nodding, Daedelus cast a glance to the wide-eyed redhead, vaguely palming a blanket from a passing soldier. "Here, now," he quietly soothed after clearing his throat. "Come on, Tago." Harry's eyes narrowed when the toddler didn't budge, his vision fixed on a dark corner in his crib. "Fine, we can take Snape's blanket."

Daedelus reached behind Kaltagonus and wrapped it around him, lifting him out of the crib.

"No." The toddler softly protested, his little hands seizing the railing.

"This is no time to play, Kaltagonus. Come on, we have to leave." The Captain urged, using a free hand to pry small fingers from the bar.

"No!" Kaltag persisted, grabbing the handrail.

"Kaltagonus, you'll have your cradle later; right now, we must meet mama and papa, yes?"

"NOOO!" Cried the boy pointing at his crib. Harry rolled his eyes; leave it to Kaltagonus to throw a tantrum in the midst of a bloodbath.

The soldier issued an annoyed sigh. "What, a toy? Is your lion in there?" Kaltag fidgeted, aiming his short forefinger in the far corner of his cradle. As Harry craned his neck to look into the cot, Daedelus' brow creased and he shifted the child to one arm, suspicious. "What is that?"

"Mm, dada's hat," the tot thoughtfully replied, taking his drool-covered fists and smacking them on Daedelus' helmet. With an absent affirmation, Daedelus set the boy's slaphappy hands aside and eyed the backward headdress dubiously.

"Eomel," he called, grabbing the brown-haired man's attention. "Get the General."

"Where is Captain Diomedes? He has my—Daedelus, what is taking you so long?" Spiridon strode through the door, frowning. "We are waiting for you and ..." He froze, his dark eyes falling on the bronze helmet in the crook. "Is that Lysander's helmet?"

Daedelus nodded, handing the redhead to the General. "I think so, sir. Should I...?" Staring at the helmet in distrust, Spiridon turned Kaltag's cheek onto his shoulder and gave a curt nod to the Captain. The soldiers quieted, and Harry and Kaltag the senior froze, all waiting with bated breath as Daedelus picked up the abandoned helmet. Harry sighed in relief when no surprises awaited them

underneath. That was until a round object dropped from beneath the helmet landing with a loud crack and rolled on the floor.

A head of tangled hair with large chunks of hair missing rolled to Spiridon's feet, and Harry could only imagine the terror in the man's eyes before he had died; unfortunately he couldn't, since one eye was shut and the other was missing. It was official: Harry Potter was going to throw up.

"Mercy!" Daedelus exclaimed. "Lysander!" The Battalion roared in anguish and fury, which did nothing to help Harry's nausea. He was at least glad Kaltagonus looked somewhat in a similar state. When Harry was sure his dinner wasn't ready to spew chunks down his front, his eyes strayed to the severed head, now identified as Lysander, that had been beaten very badly and his nose looked broken. His cheeks were discolored, both from death and punches, and his lip was swollen and split.

"That monster," Spiridon needlessly stated, keeping young Kaltag's head down on his shoulder.

"Now you know how it feels," Harry heard the red-haired Being harshly mutter. Harry couldn't find it in himself to disagree.

"Eomel," Spiridon snapped to attention and motioned for the soldiers to continue their duties. "Make sure everything is collected with the utmost care. Alert the families and prepare the pyres; I want the people to know our brothers did not die in vain. Daedelus," the man in question tore his wide eyes away from Lysander's dismembered head. "You are to come with us. We will make for the city tonight; tomorrow, we search for Mystikos. This has gone on for far too long."

Inclining his head, Daedelus cast a sad look at Lysander. "Yes, sir." He nodded to a soldier who gently gathered the head in his arms.

Toddler Kaltagonus groaned and began squirming in Spiridon's grip. "Down! Peese? Peese?"

"No, no, young one," Spiridon declined, tightening his hold and patting the boy's back soothingly. "I'll let you down with mama, all right? Papa needs you to stay still for a minute."

Kaltagonus wriggled, his head dangerously turning toward the bodiless soldier but Daedelus jumped in his line of sight at the last minute, with a wet cloth. Kaltag fidgeted as Daedelus toiled to rub the flecks of blood off his small face. "No! Da—!"

"Taggy, no," Spiridon's voice grew firm, gently reproving the redhead, his long fingers holding the small chin between them. "Daddy needs you to be still." Harry snickered as both redheads pouted, vaguely musing that some things never changed. The Celestial's eyes shifted over the boy's shoulder and he grabbed the carved lion — one of the few things not soiled by blood — produced by a Battalion member.

"Look, here is Leandros. Play with him while Uncle Daedelus cleans you off, all right? Then we'll go see mother and you can play with Nikola and Starbuck." The toddler made a face at the blond Being's name (the elder Kaltagonus snickered) but was immediately occupied with the wooden toy, holding still long enough so Daedelus could finish.

Spiridon heaved a breath, eyeing his second-in-command. "Come; block Kaltagonus' sight of this massacre. We need to get out off here. My son has already suffered enough at the hands of—"

"Most esteemed General Spiridon."

Everyone whipped around, and scrambled to encircle the General and prince protectively, swords drawn at the abnormally cynical baritone voice. Harry stared around the room in confusion, waiting for some creature or stranger to pop into view, but nothing happened.

"I bring you an admonition from the Dark Prince Mystikos."

Spiridon whirled around, his hand protectively pressing Kaltag's head back into his shoulder as his eyes scanned the bloodstained walls and furniture. His expression grim and his eyes large, Spiridon called "Where are you? Show yourself!"

Daedelus protectively rolled his sword and several soldiers attacked the hangings, savagely stabbing at the cloth. After they had slashed the material to shreds, one announced, "All clear, sir!"



"Then where is it coming from?" Spiridon sharply questioned, glaring at his company around the room.

"S-s-sir...?" a timid voice spoke, causing all of the soldiers to spin on their heels.

Harry felt his stomach flip at the sight of Lysander's docked off head staring at the group of soldiers, his vibrant hazel eye captivating everyone's attention. His face looked like a twisted version of Mad-Eye's, sans the magical eye. The warrior holding the head shook with fear making the head bounce in his grasp.

Harry swallowed thickly when the split and swollen lips stretched into a malicious smirk. "Yes." His deep, forbidding voice rattled Harry's nerves. "Look upon the face your impudence has created, General Spiridon. Your selfish boldness brought these men to their deaths; once again, blood is on your hands."

Spiridon, though visibly disturbed, narrowed his eyes and kept Kaltag's view away from the talking head. "What business have you with me, dark spirit?"

Lysander's eye twitched in its socket and several men shuddered as blood trickled beneath it as well. "The Dark Prince demands you never hold company with the Lady Athene, so goes the warning to all men who attempt to look upon Zeus's Dearest in any sensual manner. The manhood of your brothers burns on the ill-fated bridal bed as forewarning of the Prince's bitter wrath should Lord Mystikos' decree be overlooked."

Harry suppressed the urge to retch upon hearing what the foul stench was. Many soldiers paled at the threat of castration, but Spiridon and Daedelus looked absolutely murderous. "The Dark Prince demands you to keep away from the Lady Athene; else the consequence is death."

"Then kill me!" Spat Spiridon. "I fear no man that would not show his face! I fear no coward! Kill me and be done with it!"

"Not you, revered General," the head mocked, "Keep away from the Lady Athene, or your beloved children — even the dearly loved firstborn — will suffer the thrice-sharpened edge of Anomos, the lawless blade of Xenos." Spiridon finally did blanch and his hold

fearfully tightened around the wide-eyed toddler. "If you want them to see their third year, you will never look upon Athene again. Never." The head snarled, foaming crimson at the corners of its mouth.

White-faced and obviously shaken, Spiridon ran his fingers through lengthy red locks, whispering hoarsely, "What ... you are asking of me—"

"Is nothing compared to the Dark Prince's wrath when his warnings are not heeded," guillotined Lysander snapped.

"And how will you keep them apart?" Daedelus growled fiercely, his knuckles white from gripping his sword. "How will Mystikos know?"

A bone-chilling smile broadened across Lysander's blood-spattered face. "My Hybrid Homnibeluans are not my only true company; perhaps you should take a closer look at yours." At this, Daedelus spun around, glaring at the dumbfounded members.

"Who is it? Huh?" He rounded on the nearest soldier, seizing him at the neck and yelling in his face, "WHAT COWARD WORKS FOR THE DARK FILTH THAT HAS MURDERED OUR BROTHERS?"

"Peace, Daedelus!" Spiridon mollified, nodding to a few soldiers to separate the two. It took a few seconds, but Daedelus' large hands were pried from around the man's neck, allowing the frightened warrior to escape. Eyeing the Captain until he was calm enough to proceed Spiridon's eyes drifted to the gleeful cyclops.

"You cannot ask this of me."

Lysander's face contorted in a scowl. "This is not a request; it is a command and your last warning. If Mystikos' Trusted informs of any duplicitous efforts to outwit him, in the same hour you will find your cherished trio's blood spilled on their Cherub beds, their souls crossing Charon to meet Lord Hades. Your choice, General."

Young Kaltagonus broke the tense silence with a fitful moan, writhing in the torn General's arms. Spiridon turned his head to face Kaltag's, his eyes wooly and falling shut as a hand fisted in red hair. When next he opened his eyes, his dark blue gaze glared daggers at the ragged but pleased head of Lysander. "You won't get away

with this. By and by, I will find a way to rid our lives of you. Make no mistake: when I find you, you are dead. That, is my vow."

A dark smile crossed the battered face, making Harry's insides go cold. "I would like to see you try ... especially when you're already DEAD!"

No sooner than the words had been roared from Lysander that Spiridon dived out of the way of a nasty red beam. The ray struck an unsuspecting soldier who howled on impact and fell to the ground in a fit. Harry vaguely heard Lysander's possessed-like, twisted laugh as Battalion members scrambled to their fallen comrade's aid, but it was too late. The man thrashed about, blood bubbling over his lips and chin and Harry briefly saw his flesh blackening at a rapid pace before he looked away, uneasy. He groaned in revulsion when his eyes drifted back to Lysander only to watch the cackling head explode and shower the nearby soldiers in blood, bone, and brain matter.

"Daedelus, Markés, Darius: come!" Spiridon roared over the commotion, bypassing the soldier being eaten alive by fire and sprinting out the door. Harry felt the sharp pull and was forced to break into a run to follow them, Kaltag close behind. The General navigated the halls like a man possessed, darting in and out of corridors and through several doors. He must've looked a fright to all that they passed in the hallways, covered in blood and whatever else.

The requested soldiers kept pace in silence, their hands never leaving the hilts of their swords as they followed him closely. Young Kaltag stared at the blur of hallway in confusion, but he didn't make a sound.

It wasn't until they nearly ran over a knot of terrified maidservants that Markés asked, "General, where are we going? We passed the exit four turns ago — we must get you out of the palace!"

"No!" Spiridon hastily replied, skidding around another corner. "I will not leave, not yet!"

"But sir," Daedelus implored, "Did you not hear him? He will kill the children if—"

"I was there! I heard it!" Spiridon sneered over his shoulder, finally slowing down; Harry was grateful for the rest. He paused outside a darkened entrance and turned to the assembled guard, a forlorn expression marring his usually hard face. Running his hand over the toddler's back Spiridon said quietly, "I know. I know. But if I know Mystikos, if it's not one threat, it's another." The men exchanged looks, disquieted. "How long will it be before he changes it from just my being banned, to the children: children of my blood? I can't let him take my children from us."

Frowning deeply, Daedelus sharply glanced at the others. "Darius, Markés, take a walk." The pair left without question, leaving the Captain with their distraught leader. As Daedelus stepped closer to him, so did Kaltag and Harry. "Sir..."

"I'm scared, Daedelus. Actually scared." the man began, staring at the redheaded tot as he spoke. "I've only been frightened like this once before: I was barely out of boyhood when I watched a man kill those dearest to me, and come for my life. But now..." Spiridon shook his head. "I cannot let Mystikos win this."

"What choice do you have?"

"None!" Spiridon's shout echoed down the corridor. Young Kaltagonus flinched, staring at the dark-haired General in apprehension. "I'm sorry," Spiridon quickly appeased, waving the toy lion in the boy's face. "I'm so sorry. If only I'd. . . . I can't let him have you," he whispered with conviction, pressing his nose to the boy's temple. Harry, though somewhat sympathetic to the man's plight, still thought it was all wrong. It should have been his mother consoling the young Being. None of this would have happened had Spiridon told the truth back at St. Mungo's.

"General," Daedelus softly began, "what are you going to do?"

With a defeated expression, Spiridon glanced down at the silent child in his arms and met Daedelus' gaze. "What I should have done long ago: smother my pride and go to Zeus. Only he has the authority to help us now." With that, Spiridon silently turned back around and entered the darkened room, leaving a stunned Daedelus in his wake.

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(Olympos, the Private Symposium of Zeus at O Oíkos Tōn Díos (The House of Zeus). Sunday, August 15, 1981. 10:00 PM.)

Harry's ears rang with an ethereal melody and the raucous laughter of many men. The next memory placed him in a lively room, surrounded by men on couches along the wall nursing large drinking cups and, he felt his face heat up, bare women dancing or lying with said men. He jumped as a boy no older than sixteen (who like the women, wasn't dressed) walked through him to serve fruit to a cantankerous gray-bearded fellow. Harry vaguely noted a round-faced boy beside the tetchy gentleman, barely covered by a fur blanket. The Gryffindor blinked, wondering if the Quintessence had botched up and sent them to the wrong memory; well, he'd only hoped.

However Spiridon, Kaltag, and Daedelus emerged from the darkness shrouding the entrance, their eyes scanning the room for someone amidst the drunken bodies. Immediately upon finding the person, Daedelus fell to the floor in a bow, and Spiridon followed seconds later. "Your majesty," Spiridon replied from his prostrated state. "Forgive me for intruding."

Harry watched Zeus emerge from beneath two fawning chestnut-haired women, eyeing the General with distaste. "You dare to interrupt my private symposium?" His voice was low and threatening, and his eyes glittered with strong dislike.

Daedelus seemed to shake under the harsh voice, but Spiridon simply held onto the wriggling toddler. "Please, your majesty; I seek your counsel in urgency."

"I never thought I'd see the day: proud, big-mouthed General Spiridon scraping before the king," Ares scorned from his seat near his father. Harry recognized Apollo and Dionysus, and a few nameless men he remembered were part of the Cabinet. Each had their own girl — or boy — practically wrapped around them in various states of undress.

"Why have you disturbed my privacy, General? Or yet, how did you find me?"

"It was simple," Spiridon simply replied, raising his eyes to glare at the elder Being. "You are either with your wife or another companion; your list of consorts runs shorter than I anticipated." The girl playing the strange instrument suddenly stopped, staring at the General in shock. The servant boy nearly collided with the jar of wine and dropped the tray of fruits he was carrying upon hearing Spiridon's slight.

Zeus held up a hand as Ares went for his sword, his face murderous. "Were you not my Favorite's Chosen I would allow my war-hungry son to cleave your head from your shoulders," he stated almost conversationally, pausing to take a drink from his goblet. "But do not foolishly think I will allow you to undermine my authority in the presence of my guests without consequence."

"Forgive me your majesty, I did not mean to challenge you."

"That is a lie," Zeus quickly returned, pushing away the women's questing fingers. "I am no fool, Spiridon; you would defy me even in the face of death."

"Then I consider this the face of death." The blue-eyed soldier snapped, meeting Zeus's gaze. The room was tense with everyone staring between the two stubborn souls.

Narrowing his eyes, Zeus continued, "If memory serves me right, this event was by invitation only, and you are the very last person I would extend an invitation to," Zeus growled, earning spiteful chuckles from his sons. "So again, Spiridon of Athens: why have you disturbed my guest-men at my symposium?"

"...Páppos?" The room stirred at the small voice coming from beneath Spiridon's genuflected form. Harry watched a tuft of shaggy red hair come into view followed by a wide blue eye.

Stretching his neck to investigate the tiny visitor, a smile spread across the High Being's face and he practically pushed the nude women to the floor. "My heir," he acknowledged, moving from his seat to snatch the frightened boy up before Spiridon could protest. "You are a little young to be attending symposium, yes? And should you not already be swayed by Hypnos? And ... what has happened to your clothing, child? Is ... is this. . . . What is the meaning of this?" He roared. "You bring my heir to an adult affair and dressed in

bloodstained garments? Tell me why I should not have the heads of both you and your second!"

Unflinchingly, Spiridon stood to his feet while Daedelus remained on the ground still. "That is why I have invaded your privacy, your majesty. There was another attack tonight." Zeus's jaw tightened. "Three, now four, dead and mutilated. Mystikos has threatened to kill the children and I..." Spiridon swallowed, cupping his sword for support. "I need your assistance."

Zeus's fuzzy eyebrows furrowed and he eyed the General as if considering his request. Harry watched as the others in the room comically eavesdropped, making no motion to hide their snooping. After several long minutes that consisted of the High Being and Athena's husband in an intense staring match, Zeus turned his head slightly toward the rest of the room, his eyes still fixed on Spiridon.

"Leave us."

One by one the guests flocked out of the room, the young women unashamed and making no move to cover themselves. Ares lingered longer than the rest, but moments before he crossed the threshold Zeus called out, "Ares, do not go far. Your judgment may perhaps be necessary." The Being of War inclined his head, peering at the face down Daedelus in revulsion. "Come, General. To the terrace."

Spiridon nodded, facing his Captain before trailing Zeus. "Daedelus, go to my wife. Watch over them for me." Bowing his head, Daedelus left Ares alone as Spiridon stalked after the High Being.

Harry rolled his eyes as he was once again grabbed by an invisible force, following the man out onto the dark balcony. The moon was full and high, casting an eerie glow on the figures of Spiridon and Zeus. In the distance, the moon's beam highlighted the canopy of the forest, stretched out for miles and miles.

Young Kaltag grinned widely flashing his unusually straight teeth, his small forefinger pointing at the sallow sphere in excitement. "Mama Shleen!" He stated proudly.

"Good boy. That's—"

"Yes, young one, that is the Mother Moon, Selene," Zeus interrupted Spiridon's response. "You are very smart, and unnaturally keen in sky-gazing." Kaltag fell quiet and popped his thumb in his mouth, looking rather nervous as Zeus ran thick fingers through his long hair. "Kaltagonus is my favorite grandchild." He began after a pause.

"I am honored you think so highly of him."

Zeus gave the demure toddler a wide smile. "However, I find myself at odds when life reminds me that not only is he the firstborn of my Favorite," the High Being crooked a finger under the boy's chin, "he was, regrettably, sprung from your loins." He spoke the latter in a low, objectionable whisper. Spiridon pursed his lips and stared at the polished floor. "It is no secret that I do not like you, Spiridon."

"That much is obvious, your majesty." Spiridon sharply returned. Zeus frowned at him before pressing the tot's face into his shoulder.

"Your cheek, your effrontery, your ... obstinacy is not something I admire. You are not right for my daughter, and you do not belong here." The white-gold bearded Being pierced. "The only proper act I commend you for is giving me three remarkable grandchildren. That is as far as my appreciation extends."

"With all due respect your majesty," the General crudely began, "I did not come here for your respect or gratitude. In fact, I do not care whether you like me or not. All I care about is the safety of my wife and our children from Mystikos."

"There would have been no trouble if you had not married her."

Spiridon's brow furrowed dangerously. "So you would have allowed your daughter — the one you claim to be your Preferred — to be ravaged by a madman who cannot tell sun from moon?" His tone inflected incredulity.

Zeus pursed his lips and stared over the forest. "I would have—"

"Handled it?" Seethed Spiridon, scowling. "Like you're handling things now? You should have allowed us to take them out of the palace the first time Mystikos broke in."



"Do you doubt that I could protect them?" Harry's brow rose at the elder Celestial's question. Obviously, he cynically mused, considering the palace had been broken into not once but a number of times. Zeus was in more denial about the situation than Mystikos was about Athena's marriage (and that was saying something).

Spiridon's jaw visibly clenched. "Honestly, your majesty?" Young Kaltagonus giggled at Zeus's sour look.

"I want them to remain here. I will take care of them." Zeus declared.

"Sir, if they stay here they will be killed." The General repeated, his eyes shining in discontent. "For their safety, it is best that the children go away with me."

"Absolutely not." Zeus spun around to glare at the Being. "They will stay here, at the palace, where they will be—"

"Protected'?" The General mocked, scoffing. "That's a laugh. Mystikos has broken through your unbreakable walls and has found them time and time again."

"We will take better precautions for defense."

"Is he an idiot?" Kaltag said in disbelief.

"Well," Harry dryly began, "he is a member of your family." And of course, he remained unheard.

"No security guard can defeat him! You should have seen the carnage he caused in the nursery! He killed the Battalion's best skilled guardsmen. You can revivify Ajax the Greater if you so desire but it would not make a difference." The man harangued, finally running out of steam. Spiridon sighed, his shoulders slumping. He carefully sidled up to Zeus and stared at the drowsy toddler in the man's arms, gently prying the thumb from his mouth. He continued in a quieter tone, "Your majesty, there is a spy in our midst. We do not know who or why, so it would be wise to get the children away from here as soon as possible."

Zeus seemed to consider the request for a few long minutes as he settled his two-year-old armful on a squashy chaise. He watched Kaltagonus fidget into a more comfortable position before facing the

forest once more. "Why should I send the children with you? Why can they not stay behind with their mother?"

"Would you want to risk having them abducted?" Spiridon replied without hesitation. "Could you endure the stress of not knowing when they will next be attacked? Could you bear to look at Athene if one of our children ends up murdered, and under your protection?" The latter was said in a strained whisper, but the words rang just as loud in everyone's minds. "I would gladly die if it meant sparing my children."

"By all means." Harry grumbled, a deep frown darkening his expression.

"But I know Mystikos. He's twisted, he's sick, and he's confused."

"Well, that certainly sounds familiar." The wizard snapped, glaring daggers at his mother's tormentor.

"Gods, he thinks Athene is his soul mate and that Kaltagonus is his firstborn! What's next, sir? After he's through spilling my blood he goes after everything else sharing my blood? Because he will not give up so easily. Do you truly want to take that chance?" Spiridon stirred and breathed deeply. "I know this will be hard for you, and Athene; but I would rather her be separated and the children alive than together ... where the children will most certainly die."

Dozens of emotions could be seen flitting across Zeus's eyes even as his face remained as hard as stone. At long last he softly answered, "I do not like you, nor will I ever." He glared down his nose at the General, but shifted his softening gaze to the child curled on the divan. "But these are my grandchildren, and my heir."

The king leveled his stare on the helmeted General. "Therefore, I will do all in my power to make sure they are kept safe. Even if it unfortunately means you are their sole protector." He grudgingly stated. Spiridon inclined his head, grateful. "Yes. You will go to Crete, my sacred place. I will have the servants build you a home not far from the Knossos, but it will take some time. A few days, at most."

"With all due respect, your majesty," Spiridon haltingly began, "Do you not think Mystikos will look there first? He knows Athene and I

would go to you seeking assistance; he will turn the isle upside down in his determination to find us. What then?" Zeus's eyes strayed to the softly snoring redhead. "We must go under human cover; a city, and only we can know the location. London, Rome, America—"

"No," the elder protested, his eyes still fixed on Kaltagonus. They gleamed something fierce; Harry was quite unsettled. "Somewhere close."

Frowning, Spiridon shook his head in thought. "I can only think of Athens."

Zeus nodded once, his lips fixed in a grim line. "Athens." He paused, the silence heavy in the humid Olympian air. "Ares." Zeus called, waiting for the serious Being to enter the terrace. "You will accompany the General and the Great Prince to my daughter. Cut down anyone in your path who tries to hinder you." Ares inclined his head and threw a dark look at Spiridon before exiting. Zeus dropped a hand to young Kaltag's disheveled hair once more before he crossed his arms and turned toward the forest.

"Go."

Spiridon carefully gathered the snoozing child in his arms and made for the exit, pausing at the entrance. "Thank you, your majesty. I am in your debt."

"Guard them with your life, and I will consider your debt paid."

Nodding one last time, Spiridon and Kaltagonus disappeared from the palace.

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(Olympos, Hephaistos' Forge. Sunday, August 15, 1981. 11:07 PM.)

"Oh my God, have we entered Hell?"

Kaltagonus dryly groused as burning heat greeted them in the next memory. Harry was inclined to agree as he felt beads of sweat form on his brow. Orange light played on the stone walls before them, dancing as a refreshing wind passed through what appeared to be a

cave. Harry was standing beside Kaltag in the entrance, half facing a white coastline shielded by dark trees and a long expanse of sea. Water lapped at sand, floating cool breezes over on which Harry could taste the salt.

The other half of him was producing fat droplets of sweat from the heat within the cave. He could hear the distinct echo of a heavy object dropping on metal, hissing, and a playful voice of that belonging to a child. Kaltagonus' brow lowered and he ducked deeper into the winding cave, Harry following, squinting at the heavily marked and tanned man that came into view, sweating over the fire.

"Is that ... Hephaistos?" He muttered, receiving confirmation when a voice from the cavern yelled, "Hephaistos! Have they arrived?"

Daedelus stepped into view, frowning when the man shook his head and passed through Harry and Kaltag to the entry. The Captain looked up at the moonlit sky, worry marring his handsome face. He almost turned to go back in the grotto when a dark speck in the skies caught Harry's attention. Harry moved closer, watching the dot grow larger and more monstrous, but Daedelus made no move to grab his sword. As the moon shone off the object, Harry faintly heard harsh grunts and the beating of wings. He finally realized it was a small carriage manned by winged horses soaring over the dark sea and galloping to a halt near Daedelus, who rushed out to meet it.

The door to the carriage flew open before the horses came to a final stop and out jumped Ares, his scowl firmly in place. Daedelus nodded to him and helped Spiridon and Kaltag out, guiding the trio to the caves. "The Lady Athene has been most worried about you and the young prince, sir. I had to stop her several times from leaving to find you."

The men navigated the cave, hastily greeting Hephaistos (who continued to work as if people just waltzing in were an everyday occurrence) and moving deeper into the rocky, narrow cavern lined with torches. Harry and Kaltag trailed all the while, coming to the last room, which was more spacious and mercifully cooler than Hephaistos' forge. They were greeted with the sight of a pacing Athena, casting vigilant looks to a trio of playing toddlers, only one of which seemed to be really enjoying themselves.

"Spiridon," Athena breathed in relief, rushing to hug him. She pulled back to inspect Kaltagonus who gave her an annoyed grunt for disturbing his slumber. "I was so worried. When you were not behind me, I—"

"I know." Spiridon whispered, his available hand kneading her shoulder. "I know." He made a noise of surprise as two identical blurs abandoned their toys and tackled his knees, causing him to almost topple. Patting the head of each child, Spiridon's eyes became overcast. "How are they?"

Athena closed her eyes and shook her head, running her fingers through the dark hair of the fourth tot. "They have only stopped crying. Not a word has passed their lips, and poor Androcles is trying his hardest to get them to play."

"Oh, gross. Tell me we were not playmates; that's just sick," elder Kaltagonus moaned, gagging and making faces at the wild-haired youth.

Spiridon knelt and ruffled the suntanned boy's hair, giving him a crooked smile. His smile fell almost immediately when he noticed his children's haunted faces. Nikola sniffled and rubbed at her eyes, probably wiping away new tears, and Starbuck looked paler than the sand on the shore. When Spiridon extended his free arm, without delay they ran into his embrace, and from the looks of it, Nikola was squeezing the life out of him. He squeezed back just as hard. After a few moments of indulging in the presence of his children, Spiridon glanced up at Athena through Nikola's curly hair.

"I went to your father." He softly confessed nodding at Athena's somewhat stunned look. "We ... we've come to a decision. One he thinks that is best."

Athena narrowed her eyes coldly. "Without my consideration?" Harry chuckled at Spiridon's discomfort and watched as he called Daedelus in and gave him a folded note and what seemed to be a letter. Athena shepherded the reluctant toddlers to what Harry made out to be a darkened bedroom. Ares announced he was heading out to guard the entrance with Hephaistos, leaving the couple by themselves.

Athena wasted no time rounding on the General. "You went to my father and you—you made a decision without me? Without my knowledge and consent?"

"There was no time to get your consent. Our children's lives were in danger."

"That's right: our children! This means we must make decisions regarding them!" She snapped. "You are not supposed to be making secret pacts about them behind my back!"

"Well, I'm not going behind your back now, am I?" Spiridon countered. "I'm telling you the truth!"

"Which would be a first." Harry grumbled to himself.

Spiridon softened as Athena held her head in her hand, shaking it. He crossed over to her, hesitantly embracing the stressed Entity. "I had to go to him right away, Athene. Mystikos ... he's ... he's made a threat. A curse, actually." Athena's head snapped up and her wide eyes met his.

"A curse?"

Spiridon nodded. "He has a spy somewhere, we don't know where. But it is someone who has access to the children, which has been a lot of people lately. He says he will kill the children..." Athena made a strained noise in the back of her throat. "...if I ever see you again."

The blonde Celestial's brow fell and she turned from her husband's embrace to stare at him in horror. She gripped his arms tightly, her knuckles white, and she slowly shook her head. "Spiridon—"

"I must leave," he stated. "You know that. We knew he would strike and that he would reveal his motives soon—"

"We cannot surrender!"

"—We can't take the chance, Athene. We don't know what Mystikos is capable of. Which ... is why I went to the High Being." The General sighed heavily, his shoulders drooping. "And we came to a conclusion. One, I am sure, will make you think me vile."

"Not a problem here," Kaltagonus drawled and Harry nodded, both glaring at the soldier.

Athena frowned, staring at her husband expectantly. "I could never think you vile, Spiridon. I am sure my father came up with a reasonable decision in which we can work." She smiled nervously, her arms keeping a vice-like grip on the General. "What did you decide?"

Swallowing thickly, Spiridon lowered his eyes to the ground, licking his dry lips. "I am to leave Olympos," he haltingly admitted. "And the children are to come with me."

Athena turned white in the torchlight, and she backed away, shoving him away slightly. Spiridon's arms dropped to his sides and he closed his eyes, turning away from her. "We do not know if Mystikos will keep away from you if I am gone, but we agreed we cannot have the children here or anywhere readily accessible to him. I'm so sorry, Athene."

"You're leaving?"

"It's the only way to ensure your safety and the children's safety."

"And you're taking the children?" Her voice was quiet and she refused to look at Spiridon.

"Athene, I have to."

"I am not going to see them again, am I?" Her soft words seemed to echo across the stone walls, harsh and final.

Spiridon approached her, settling his hands on her shoulders. "I will do everything in my power to destroy Mystikos."

Athena's mouth trembled and she finally turned her large brown eyes to Spiridon's. "I'm never going to see them again ... am I?"

The General stared sadly at his wife, who in no way resembled the headstrong goddess of War Harry had come to know, before pulling her into a crushing embrace. They remained like that, locked in the firelight of the cavern, unknowingly being watched by two solemn boys while the toddlers slept on, oblivious.

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Time seemed to fly by before their eyes as Spiridon and Athena parted to the toddlers' resting place. Harry and Kaltag watched as Athena spent the rest of the time encased by toddlers on each side, her fingers memorizing each dip and dent on their sleeping bodies. Spiridon paced back and forth around the small room as Kaltag and Harry watched the scene with sad eyes.

"I can't believe it." Kaltagonus replied after some time.

Harry nodded. "I know; this is terrible."

"That snotty little bastard is spooning me," the Paraffin shook his head angrily. Harry rolled his eyes and watched the sleeping tots in question, raising a brow at young Xenik's arm draped over Kaltag's middle. "And I can't believe I'm letting him."

Harry wryly replied, "I thought he hated you."

"This from the prick who hates me?" Kaltag echoed Harry's words. "I'll make that git eat his words. I wish I had a bloody camera. . . ."

"I'd hate to see this in the family album," Harry lightly joked. "'S'good blackmail material, though."

Spiridon sharply turned toward the door at the sound of footfalls in the corridor and glanced back at the bed. Athena still lay quietly between the children, caressing their hair. Harry followed the man as he slipped out nodding to Daedelus who was balancing a few thick boxes.

"General—"

"Shh," Spiridon silenced, indicating to the bedroom.

"Sorry. But I got everything you wanted with minor difficulty."

"Very good. The papers?" He dubiously prompted, impatient. Daedelus bit his lip but nodded to his left.



"Protected beneath my sword." His face scrunched in interest as Spiridon sighed with relief. "You do know what area Dyson specializes in?"

The General glowered at the younger Celestial growling, "I'm aware, Captain." Daedelus nodded, wise enough not to push the subject. "And?" Spiridon prompted when the man remained silent. "Was the letter delivered?"

Daedelus nodded whispering, "Hermes is delivering it as we speak. It should get there within the hour." Spiridon's shoulders seemed to lose some of its tension at the end of Daedelus' report.

"Good work, Captain."

Daedelus nodded, staring at the boxes in his arms. "I guess ... this is really happening." He chuckled flatly as Spiridon tilted his head in puzzlement. "You're really leaving. The children are ... you're all leaving."

The General sighed, staring into the room's entrance at the bed. "We have to," he affirmed. "Otherwise, we're all dead."

"General Spiridon," the men turned to acknowledge Ares, looking formidable and sinister in the torchlight. "I must report to the High Being in the next few hours. He is awaiting word of your safe arrival to the safe house and your plans from here, on."

"Yes," Spiridon confirmed, squaring his shoulders and throwing a cursory glance at his second. "It would be wise to send a team of guards on reconnaissance before we arrive."

"I will gather the strongest men and sweep the area." Ares promised, tipping his head slightly.

Nodding, Spiridon agreed. "Tell his majesty I will be taking the children and the heir to my childhood home in New Ithaca."

Ares angled his head somewhat and smiled in accord. "Of course." Turning on his heel, he exited the cave, his heavy footsteps drowned out by Hephaistos' hammering.

"New Ithaca?" Daedelus questioned once the Being of War was out of sight. "You're hiding in New Ithaca?"

"Of course not," Spiridon growled, finally relieving the Captain of his load. He pulled open the lid of one package and nodded with satisfaction, thrusting it in the baffled soldier's arms. "Put this on, and ready the horses for departure."

"Uh, yes, sir," the bewildered man obeyed. "Oh! Um ... where?"

Spiridon gathered the rest of the boxes in his arms and faced the young Being with a resolute expression. "Set a course for Capri, Italy. It's time to visit an old friend."

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(On the Bluffs of Capri, Italy. La Villa Di Ignazio (The Ignazio Villa). Monday, August 16, 1981. 2:59 AM.)

There was a loud banging somewhere in another room, vague muffled shouts coming from the dark, a clatter and a loud curse.

"Lumos."

At the soft incantation a wand tip lit up the darkness, illuminating a hall and among other things, a very familiar large, hooked nose.

Harry watched curiously as young Snape glided across the room (not much to look at as dull gray sheets were strewn over everything), a small arc of yellow light lighting his path through the darkness. Snape finally made it to the door, quietly cursing whoever was behind it for having such hard bones to rap nonstop on the door. Before he could say anything, the person shouted, "Severus! Severus, it's Spiridon! Please, open up!"

Snape's angular features instantly sobered and he threw the locks on the door, holding it wide. "You're late." He said by way of greeting. Except for Spiridon and Daedelus the children were dressed in Muggle clothing, which was a welcome change for Harry, who'd mostly seen them in cloth diapers and scant clothing; the two soldiers donned heavy robes.

Spiridon didn't reply to Snape's comment and immediately pushed a small hand into his. Harry snorted as the elder Kaltagonus grimaced while watching his younger self, yawning and rubbing his eye with a small fist before turning to look up at the fearsome dark man who held his hand. If either of them thought the child would scream and run away, they were sorely mistaken.

All signs of sleep left Kaltagonus' little face, which had lit up upon spotting Snape. "Se'wus! Up! Peese?" He extended his small arms and was positively hopping on the balls of his feet. Looking distinctly uncomfortable, the once scowling, no-nonsense, snarky potion master obliged, gathering the toddler in his arms. "Dank you." The redhead replied, resting his head on the man's shoulder.

Harry didn't know whether to laugh in amusement or horror. He was in Snape's house. He was standing in Snape's foyer. He was watching Snape cuddle a two-year-old. One thing was for certain: he could never look at the surly potion master in the same way again. "You stupid, stupid boy." Kaltag rebuked, crossing his arms and frowning at the pair.

Spiridon swept Starbuck into his arms as Daedelus carried Nikola, both groggy and heavy-eyed. Eyeing the exhausted group, Snape nodded toward the staircase, the only area of the room other than the walls not hidden behind sheets. "I've prepared the last two rooms down the hall on your left," he informed as he led them up the steps. "How long will you be staying?"

"Not long. We will leave in the morning, I think," Spiridon answered as they reached the landing, careful not to bump into anything touched by Snape's wandlight. Snape strode into the last room, indicating to the two single beds that looked like mere benches in the large room.

"Your room, obviously," he moved to the next room, slightly smaller but more impressive. The room was more of a solarium, as the far wall was a series of windows facing greenery and the ocean, and overhead, a large concave skylight dominated the ceiling, where every star shone brightly. "This is the children's," he stated, motioning to the three small beds. "The skylight as well as the windows can turn opaque if you'd prefer." Snape's dark eyes flicked to the red-haired boy in his arms, who was sucking a thumb pointing up at the sky in childish wonder. Snape made a face and carefully

tugged the wet digit from the small mouth; the child didn't even notice.

The General allowed a small smirk to pass his lips, giving Snape an unreadable look. "This is fine." As he set Starbuck on the nearest bed a dark blur leapt onto it, its eyes flashing in the starlight. Spiridon batted it off the bed, but the black fuzzy creature growled its displeasure and was now replaced by a fluffy gray one.

"Kitty!" Nikola excitedly pointed from Daedelus' arms.

"Now I see where the cat thing comes from." Kaltag wryly pointed out.

Spiridon grabbed the felines with a scowl and set them out in the hall, closing the door in their inquisitive faces. He advanced to the bed, opening his mouth to address the others, but at Starbuck's playful giggle, his eyes widened. Harry watched in amusement as the General gawked, stunned at the sight of the two young cats batting the buttons of Starbuck's coat.

"Shadowcats," Snape said by way of explanation. "Gifts from Faline." Spiridon vacantly nodded as Snape ordered the cats out and mid-leap, they vanished into thin air.

"Kitty bye-bye?" Nikola glumly asked.

"Bye-bye." Starbuck confirmed sadly, patting the spots where the cats had sat.

Shaking his thoughts, Spiridon began, "Daedelus?" He set Starbuck down from the cot, passing him to the Captain. "Take them to our rooms for a moment. I need a word with Severus."

Daedelus' eyes flashed annoyance for a split second at the wizard looking smug behind his curtain of black hair before he faced Spiridon obediently. "And Kaltagonus?"

"He seems quite fine in the company of his godfather, do you not agree?"

Harry could only imagine the foul things floating through Daedelus' thoughts as he gave Snape a black look. "Right, sir." Nodding curtly,

Daedelus took the children away, leaving Snape and Kaltag alone with the General.

"What's going on?" Snape wasted no time getting to business. He set the toddler on the nearest bed and strode towards one of the covered objects across the room. "And don't lie to me. When a man donning a winged hat arrives at my door in London at one in the morning with a smile that should be outlawed and a letter forcibly requesting I make for Italy right away, I know it's not to have tea and play a rousing game of chess." Snapped Snape scathingly, who uncovered a child's bassinet and fished something from it. He stalked back and thrust a dark toy at the toddler, who gasped in delight and said something remarkably close to 'dragon'.

Snape crossed his arms and stared at Spiridon expectantly. Sighing, the General ran his hands through his hair, worn out. "It's Mystikos. He attacked earlier tonight. He killed three guards in the children's room ... right before their eyes."

Snape's brow furrowed and he whipped his head toward the grinning tot, absorbed with his new toy. "Are you sure? Because a child, no matter the age, would never act like this if they've been as traumatized as you say. Not this soon."

"Well, Kaltagonus is ... different," Spiridon winced, looking away from the boy's shifty smirk. "The others are showing signs of damage, but ... the worst of it is that he's banned me from seeing Athene, and he will kill the children if I do." He scrubbed his face with his hands once more, shaking his head and sitting beside the child. "Look Severus, I need your help. I cannot let Mystikos get Kaltagonus. He states he will kill all three, but what he wants more than anything is Athene and Kaltagonus."

Snape hesitated, grabbing his left arm but still asking, "What do you need?" Spiridon didn't answer, only stared Snape in his black eyes, and moved a hand to his robe pocket.

"I've done all I can, Severus, but I fear I can safeguard him no more." Spiridon pulled out some rolled up papers and stood, leveling Snape with a serious look. "But you can protect and shield him."

Snape's gaze flicked to the roll of papers and he suspiciously asked, "How?" Spiridon glanced over his shoulder and moved to shut and

lock the door, motioning to Snape. Rolling his eyes, the young wizard pulled out his wand and cast a Silencio at the door, nearly growling when the elder man approached him again.

"These," Spiridon held up the documents, "are adoptions papers."

"What?"

"What?"

"WHAT!" Harry, Snape and Kaltag exclaimed; well, Kaltag had yelled it, really. Snape looked absolutely flabbergasted, staring at the General as if he'd grown another head.

"They're already signed. All they need is your signature." Spiridon continued, unfurling the papers and showing them to Snape. "It's the only way, Severus."

"Did Athene sign these?"

"No," Spiridon admitted. "She would never allow it."

Snape ran a hand through his greasy locks, taking a shuddering sigh. "This is madness."

"You asshole! You were turning me over to Snape?" Kaltagonus shouted (well screeched, really).

"You have to sign, Severus, and keep him from Mystikos."

"I can't! You can protect him and the rest of your kids."

"Don't you think I've tried?" Spiridon hissed. "I've tried numerous times to get them out of the palace but Zeus and Athene thwarted me! She would never have agreed if her father objected, but now he has allowed me to take them from Olympus to live amongst the humans!" Snape's eyes narrowed slightly. "Just because we will live in Athens does not mean Mystikos will stop. If he finds out we're in Greece he will bring the country to its knees exposing our world. I cannot allow him to get the children. Severus, please," Spiridon softly begged, pressing the papers into the reluctant youth's hand. "Sign the papers. Take Kaltagonus. You cannot argue that he would not be safer at Hogwarts."

Snape's obsidian eyes faltered, dropping to look at the documents. Harry could see Spiridon's scrawled signature at the bottom of a heavily worded document, and an empty line beside it marked by a vivid red 'X'. Snape's face was hidden behind a drape of black hair, but Harry could tell he was studying the child on the cot babbling away to the dark dragon. "Severus."

The young potion master stared down his hooked nose at the papers, to his left arm, then finally met Spiridon's gaze. His lips tightened. "I'm sorry."

Spiridon backed away from him as if he'd been burned, his face contorting in a scowl. "You had this room — this, this Solarium refurbished the moment I told you your godson had an interest in astronomy!" He gestured to the skylight. The elder Kaltagonus' eyes bulged, and his face drained of color. "Don't tell me you don't want this child!"

"It's not that."

"Then what?" Spiridon snarled, startling the child on the bed. Kaltag looked at him with fearfully wide eyes and hugged the dragon tighter, gradually recoiling from the man.

Snape's brow furrowed and he glared at Spiridon as he hastily popped the button on his cuff. "This." He seethed, lifting the sleeve so Harry could see what he'd always known: the Dark Mark carved into his left forearm.

"What?" Kaltag inquired, moving around the men, but Snape had shown enough to shock the General into silence and brought his sleeve down before Kaltagonus could see it. "What is it? What's on his arm?"

Spiridon gave Snape an incredulous look. "You ... you didn't." Snape pursed his lips, fuming in the darkness.

"My father." He replied in clipped tones by way of explanation. "I was finally too much for him."

"Do not make excuses for that coward," Spiridon snapped his face tight with anger.

"Well, I didn't refuse, did I?" Snape dryly reminded, smirking crookedly. "This life sounded better than what I suffered at the hands of him."

"What life?" Kaltagonus questioned, still confused. Harry was wondering why the Quintessence wasn't answering.

"Hold your tongue!" Spiridon chastised, dismayed. "There are better things, Severus."

"Like what?" Snape's tone was razor sharp, and he looked as if he were about to cut into the General if not for the tug on his robe. Both men looked down at the toddler's watery eyes.

"Sev'wus sad?"

"Oh, for cryin' out loud you stupid clod!" Elder Kaltagonus groaned burying his face in his hands.

Snape set the toddler on his hip after he implicitly raised his arms to be held. The boy let his head fall to his shoulder, eyes drooping, and small fingers toying with the shiny buttons on his robe. "Bettow?"

Frowning at Spiridon's smug grin Snape made a face as if he'd tasted something dreadfully foul. "Erm, yes. Better."

"You see, Severus?" Spiridon whispered, idly waving the papers. "He loves you."

"Bite your tongue!" Kaltag yelled, balling his fists.

"You're his godfather. He belongs with you."

Young Snape adjusted the snoozing tot on his side and quietly shot back, "What about the Potters? Isn't the girl his godmother?" Harry felt the swell of anger take him again.

"I would never do that. Not unless you were not available and the situation was absolutely dire." The General averted his eyes to the cliffs beyond the window. "They're the last ones I'd entrust Kaltagonus' care to."



Harry noticed he didn't mention the other two and apparently, so had Snape. "You would trust them with the latter two?"

Without hesitation Spiridon replied, "Absolutely."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "And Kaltagonus?"

"Never."

"Why?" Demanded Snape, his eyebrows knit together in a dark knot.

Spiridon exhaled, scooping up the discarded toy dragon. "He is the Great Prince. He would not be safe with them."

"Bullshit." Snape called, glowering at the Celestial. "You'd still entrust him with me, of all people, considering what you already know about me. It's more than that, Spiridon. You and I both know it. Don't think I have already forgotten the birthday party mere days ago," his tone was deep and enigmatic. "You allowed everyone but the Potters to be around Kaltagonus. I know James Potter is a git in the best sense of the word, but his wife and child? You would not let them around him?"

The General turned away from the interrogation, his eyes large and wild. "Lily Potter knows too much."

Snape's brow creased. "Knows too much what?"

"Look Severus," Spiridon spun on his heel, his expression annoyed. "If you cannot take him, I must continue to retreat. I cannot stay here for long else someone will come here as well. Can you take him?" He asked, slow and deliberate.

Dark eyes fell to the softly snoring toddler, dithering, before Snape's grave gaze met Spiridon's. "You know I cannot."

"If you will not take him, what else is there to do?"

The potion master steadfastly replied, "Protect him with everything you have and more. Train him to protect himself. Be his father," he throaty in a whisper. "That is all you can do."

Spiridon paused, staring at the pair before nodding and pocketing the adoption papers. "Very well. Then I must leave you." He made for the door, pausing as he gripped the handle. "I will retire to my room to plan our next move. For now, I will leave you with him; I do not know if you will ever see him again."

Spiridon lingered at the door before he opened it and went through. The room flashed as the Silencing Charm was broken, leaving godfather and sleeping godson to spend their last moments staring out over the sea.

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(La Villa Di Ignazio (The Ignazio Villa). Monday, August 16, 1981. 6:02 AM.)

The memory eddied to a halt what could be several hours later in the same room. The skies had lightened a bit and gray dawn was chasing the midnight hour away. The group had once again gathered in the Solarium, the three men standing over the weary-eyed triplets. Spiridon looked defeated while Daedelus appeared uncertain. As always, one could get more emotion out of a rock than Snape's face.

"You're sure there's no other way, sir?" Daedelus hesitated, staring at the children mournfully.

"Are you questioning my authority, Captain?"

"No, sir," Daedelus quickly obliged, wringing his hands together. "But ... a Memory Charm?"

"Yes, why deprive them the vivid recollections of bodies beaten and tortured, parts strewn about the room, and forcible castration?" Snape drawled, raising a brow at the second. Daedelus scowled, squaring his shoulders. Spiridon sent Snape a grateful smile over the Captain's shoulder. "Perhaps one such as yourself can block these trivial things from your dreams, but we are not all as adept as you are, Captain Diomedes."

Harry allowed himself a chuckle at the Being's ire at being baited by the smug wizard.

"Severus is right, Daedelus. We cannot allow the children to relive this night in dreams. A Memory Charm is the only way."

Staring between the two dark-haired men, Daedelus resigned himself to a nod, outnumbered. "All right. Just one small hiccup in your plans: where are we going to find a wand powerful enough to wipe out a Cherubs' memory?"

"They are still young enough where a mild Memory Spell can't be thwarted by their growing forces," Snape casually lectured.

"Thank you Professor Pointless, but as it remains, you're a wizard," Daedelus condemned, glaring. "It'd take five of your wands to wipe it out."

"Or, one of my wand." Spiridon replied, producing the black wand from the folds of his robes. Daedelus gaped, speechless. If Snape was surprised, he didn't show it.

Blinking, Daedelus stared at the wand thrust at him, stunned. "Where—?"

"Please, Daedelus," Spiridon cut off. "Do it."

"Why me?" He complained even as he took the rod and examined it.

"Because he doesn't want to get his hands dirty." Kaltag scorned, giving the General a withering look.

Spiridon's brow rose. "I have it on good authority that you studied Wizards Magicks under tutelage without your erastês' consent." Daedelus' eyes widened a fraction and he averted his gaze. "Now, Captain, if you will?"

Casting a fleeting glance at the General, Daedelus nodded, kneeling before Starbuck.

"And Daedelus?"

"Yes?"

"No one is to know of the wand." Spiridon understatedly reminded. "Or else—"

"You'll kill me. Got it." Spiridon nodded in affirmation and Snape snorted. Daedelus leveled his stare with the blond Being's, staring into half-hooded brown eyes. "This will not hurt you, Buck."

"It had better not."

Steeling himself, Daedelus cupped the toddler's jaw, catching a displeased groan from the sluggish boy. "Look here, Starbuck. Good boy." Biting his bottom lip, Daedelus firmly spoke, "Oblivate."

Harry frowned as Starbuck tensed and his eyes shimmered brown, then drew blank. Daedelus raggedly sighed. "All right." Spiridon let out a breath of relief; Snape stayed silent. Daedelus scooted in front of Nikola, who'd jolted awake when her brother went stiff as a board. She pouted and eyed Daedelus warily. "Nika?" He queried. She just stared at the wand. "You're better off. Oblivate." Nikola mimicked her younger brother and relaxed, her eyes empty. "Two down." Daedelus wryly murmured, turning to the redhead.

Harry was taken aback with how hostile he looked. The toddler raptly stared at the black rod with distrust, glowering when Daedelus stooped before him. The Captain double-backed, raising a brow. "Um..." he glanced at Spiridon, who nodded once. "Oblivate."

Kaltag's expression soured, and his eyes flashed gold. Harry had a bad feeling about this.

Daedelus shook his head and stared at the toddler, bemused. "What?" Spiridon inquired, staring between the two.

An awkward chuckle escaped the Captain's lips. "Heh. Mental block."

"What?" Spiridon nearly exclaimed, his eyes as large as saucers. Snape's forehead wrinkled, somewhat skeptical.

"Could be the wand," Daedelus explained away, flinching at the toddler's death glare. "Let me try again. Oblivate." He stated more forcefully.

The young Cherub's eyes again glinted perilously gold. "Well?" Spiridon prompted.

"I. . . . It's ... it's not working."

"What do you mean it isn't working?" The General incredulously posed, tipping the tot's chin toward him. Annoyed blue eyes met his gaze.

"Surely his forces haven't fully developed," Snape smoothly cut in, crossing his arms.

"Well, I don't know. All I know is his memory can't be cleared," Daedelus replied, shaking the wand vigorously. "How old's this wand anyway?"

"It's not the wand."

"Well, it certainly cannot be the child," Snape gibed earning a glare from Spiridon.

"What else can we do?" The General gruffly asked, his tone desperate. "I cannot allow him to grow up damaged by Mystikos."

"Though it seems likely."

Daedelus frowned, staring at the irritated toddler. "I know one spell," he quietly admitted, raising his troubled eyes to Spiridon's. "It would definitely work ... at the expense of his memories."

"Well, that is what you are trying to get rid of." Snarky Snape responded.

The Captain gave him a dirty look. "Not just one memory: all of his memories." Spiridon and Snape froze. "It could clear everything he's ever known: Olympus, you, or he could remember you and forget everything else. Essentially, he would be an entirely clean slate, relearning all of his likes, dislikes, emotions, who to trust and even words again." Daedelus sternly informed. "We'd have to do it to all of them; it wouldn't be fair of the others to have an advantage over him."

Harry's brow furrowed in disbelief. There was actually a spell for that? Was it even legal?

Snape's expression was unreadable but Harry detected a quick glimmer of regret behind his eyes. Spiridon studied the incensed redhead carefully, weighing his choices. He released the small chin from his hold and his eyes glided over to the potion master.

"You know what this entails." He remorsefully began. Snape's mouth tensed. "You can no longer visit him." Harry thought he saw mild grief flicker across the wizard's black gaze. "You may be able to see him, but we cannot risk anyone tracking you and leading Mystikos or the Dark Lord to Kaltagonus. At least not until Mystikos is dead and the worlds reunite."

Snape's face remained impassive, but his eyes were fixed on the red-haired, blue-eyed two-year-old. His face just twitched before he broke eye contact and met Spiridon's dark orbs.

"Then I do not see the point of ever seeing him at all."

Grimly nodding, Spiridon squeezed Snape's shoulder. "I understand. It would ... it would hurt." Snape was stoic. "For both of you, even if you are loathe to admit it."

"Ready?" Daedelus asked after a long silence. Meeting Snape's affirmative gaze, Spiridon nodded for him to commence.

Daedelus gestured the men to give him wide berth, and he grouped the children closer together. He shut his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest, allowing his hand to weave the wand to and fro through the air in an intricate pattern. Each land of the black rod produced a white tuft of smoke, materializing in the air. Harry vaguely caught Snape's fist tautening as a smoky ouroboros began to form from the falling puffs of smoke, circling over the children.

Suddenly, the never-ending dragon released its tail from its mouth and slithered over to Starbuck, pausing by his ear, quietly growling wisps of smoke as if awaiting instruction. Daedelus' hand worked faster, the wand movements becoming impossible to learn. "Sino purgatio memoria." He chanted in a husky, deep voice that wasn't his own.

The dragon flared to life, snapping its jaws and twisting into a small coil before it wormed into Starbuck's ear, making the toddler whimper in discomfort. "Purgo memoria." Starbuck's small eyes

squeezed shut and he grimaced, rubbing at his temple. It was quite disturbing for Harry to watch.

"Purgo memoria." The rope of dragon exited Starbuck's left ear with a sickening 'pop', looking noticeably fatter than its tail waving out of the Cherub's other ear. It next glided into Nikola's head, drawing a whine from her lips. Spiridon cringed at her distress but held his ground. Harry was even more sickened by him. With another 'pop', the broad head of the dragon growled and twisted from Nikola's ear, floating beside Kaltagonus.

Finally, Daedelus' dark eyes sought the young Cherub's black look. "Purgo memoria!" He gutturally intoned. The unfurled ouroboros dove into the child's ear with some difficulty, squeezing into it causing the redhead to squirm. Spiridon flinched, torn between wanting to console the boy and letting the spell do its work. Kaltag's little head jerked a few times, no doubt trying to throw his mind's intruder out. When his small body convulsed is when someone protested.

"Get on with it, Diomedes before you kill them." This surprisingly came from Snape, who gritted his teeth and went stiff when the little boy trembled once more.

At long last, Kaltag's body went slack, and he recoiled as the dragon emerged from his head with a nasty squelching noise. Harry stared down the line of toddlers, with the dragon tail wiggling from Starbuck's right ear and its fat head exiting from Kaltag's left. The once thin, ropy pale dragon was now plump and dark red. "Finio purgatio memoria."

With a puff of smoke, the serpentine line squeezed through the triplets' ears and curled when its tail slipped from the last toddler's ear, now proportionate with the rest of its body. Suddenly it made a beeline for Spiridon but Daedelus' sharp "Evanesco!" stopped it dead in its tracks and the red dragon again swallowed its tail before vanishing. The adults sighed, relieved, watching as one by one, the children's eyes drew blank, and falling shut. Spiridon sighed with relief. Snape's sharp features were, predictably, inscrutable.

Lowering the black rod and settling the unconscious children on their backs, Daedelus handed the wand back to the General. He cursorily

met the General's expectant gaze before giving the potion master a rueful look.

"It's done."

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A/N: For those of you praying for the flashbacks to end, your prayers have been answered: this is the very last of the flashback memories ... in this story, at least. ;) The next chapter will deal with the Quintessence wrap up. Thanks for reading!

A/N 2: Far be it for me to declare myself a Latin scholar, but I humbly believe *sino purgatio memoria* loosely means "to allow the cleaning of memory" and *finio purgatio memoria* means "to cease cleaning out memory". I meant for it to mean, "Allow/Disallow the purging of memories," but whatever works. (shrug) Also, *Anomos* means 'lawless' and *Páppos* means 'grandfather' in Greek, and the *erastês* and *erômenos* is something we'll deal with in the next story (throws head back and cackles maniacally).



## Chapter Thirty-Four: Good as Gold, Part VI

"Shortly thereafter, the Potters met their demise, Lord Voldemort suffered his first downfall," Calchas haltingly began, "And Spiridon employed a powerful witch-goddess to bind your powers. The binding of your forces thwarted Golradir from gaining full control over you, allowing you to lead a relatively normal life." Kaltag quietly scoffed at the word 'normal', muttering foully under his breath.

"By all appearances, Golradir was overcome."

"And now, with the growth of your forces, the constant company of Harry Potter and the interference of magicks both strong and ancient," Hector nodded to the swirling orb on Kaltag's necklace, "Golradir is being reawakened from dormancy." They fell silent to gauge the Being's reaction, staring at the redhead through suspicious eyes.

Kaltagonus remained silent and looked world-weary at the news. Harry felt for the boy, honestly. Not that he'd ever trade places with him. Kaltag stared the surrounding forest and sighed, rubbing his face with his hands. "This is all very unbelievable."

"I assure you, this is very real." Calchas reinforced.

Kaltag glared at him between his fingers. "So you say."

"The memories speak for themselves, boy." Agamemnon gruffly scolded.

"Say ... say I believe all of this." Harry rolled his eyes at the prefect's stubbornness. "If Golradir is real—"

"He is!" Agamemnon boomed.

"If this Golradir is real," Kaltag repeated, spearing the Mycenaean with a severe look, "When — when can I expect him?"

Odysseus gave a snort of laughter. "'Expect him'? The Bellotaur is not a visitor that will graciously notify you before arriving." He finished in a mildly scathing tone. Harry was startled when the forest darkened considerably as the brunette leaned forward, his eyes piercing the visibly uneasy Being. "Understand that Golradir will stop

at nothing to gain control over your half of soul. You can turn at any time; while you are in this delicate state of volatility between your souls, the simplest of distractions can cede absolute control to Golradir. Should that happen," his voice fell a dour octave, "All hope is lost. Should he take over," Odysseus stressed, his eyes never blinking, "The Dark Lord Voldemort would be the least of Harry Potter's troubles."

Harry blanched. "Wait, wait, wait," Kaltag shook his head vehemently. "I—he'll come after Harry next? Then you need to tell me how I can get rid of him!" Harry was somewhat touched by Kaltagonus' reluctance to kill him. "I can't let him start killing people; that's bound to garner some unwanted attention."

"You cannot stop him, Kaltagonus. Golradir is your balance."

The redhead shook his head, bemused. "I thought Harry's mum was my balance." Harry slightly frowned; could Kaltagonus still think that this was all a hoax?

"She was. With her death, that task is now bestowed to her son Harry: the new balance between you and Golradir." Hector explained. "But Golradir is your counterbalance."

Harry watched the Celestial's shoulders slump in defeat. He couldn't possibly be giving up on ways not to snuff him out already! "What—what if I killed myself? Or got myself killed? Would that help?" He morbidly suggested.

"Killing yourself will prove nothing but a waste of good oil and wood," Agamemnon indifferently stated. "Spare me the heartache, boy."

Andromache rounded on him. "You could be more sympathetic."

"There is no time for sympathy, Trojan!" He jabbed a plump finger in Kaltag's direction. "That beast will soon be loosed and there will be no one to thwart him this time!"

"The boy is his only hope."

"If he is the only hope, the situation is doomed to fail!"

"Hey, I resent that you bastard!" The Being threw in.

Agamemnon leapt out of his seat roaring, "YOU DISCOURTEOUS MONGREL! YOU ARE SPEAKING TO ROYALTY!"

"Stop your tongue, noble highness," Achilles replied, his tone dripping with disdain. "Or I will stop it for you." Harry vaguely noted the trees and smoke whipping around quite fiercely.

The Mycenaean turned on him instead. "WRETCH! Are you threatening me?"

"Actually—"

"EXCUSE ME!" All eyes turned to the redheaded Being scowling at the Greeks. "Both of you shut up! It's not your life that's practically ruined! You're dead, so you have no effing right to rip each other's throats out on my borrowed time!"

Harry groaned when Agamemnon opened his mouth but was relieved when Calchas cut him off. "Time—"

"Is what? Short? Yeah, yeah, I got it, Nostradamus!" Kaltag attacked.

"Kaltagonus, you must quiet yourself—"

"Or what?" he spat. "My psychotic other half will rear itself and kill you all? You know, I have half a mind to let him!" He stopped to catch his breath from all the yelling and it seemed to Harry that he'd finally run out of steam. He nearly laughed at the expressions of shock painted on the Quintessence's faces at the implication. "I don't want to believe you," Kaltagonus throatily began, "but I can't stop myself from believing you. You've ruined my life, you've taken everything I've ever believed in and destroyed it, all in one night. I hate you. I really hate you," he glared at Agamemnon when he said this. "But I want ... I'm not even part of this Wizard War! I can't do this! What ... you're asking of me. . . ."

The Quintessence sat in silence while the young Celestial stammered. When the trees waved to a halt and the shadows settled, Andromache stared down at the Being with inscrutable eyes. "Should Golradir fight for control now while you are not trained, he will succeed and not only Olympus will suffer, but every world and dimension would suffer tenfold under his new reign of darkness. If

Harry Potter should defeat the Dark Lord Voldemort and survive," the Gryffindor started at the mention of his name, "His next task will be to destroy the only one alive who shares his blood ... you."

Kaltag had a lost look about him as her words cut not only him but Harry as well. The reality had not yet sunk in. "His brother." Kaltag whispered, staring into the shadows.

Hector nodded once. "Even if Golradir seizes control of you and your forces, you would still be trapped in the far corner of his mind, watching, helpless, as he slays your true brother. You cannot allow that to happen, Kaltagonus." Harry swallowed, the images of Hector's words playing across his mind like a grainy film. He could accept his last images being of Voldemort as he laid dying, but not Kaltagonus. It would be unbearable, even in the hereafter, if there were one. Something twisted in his chest as he pictured the redhead, clearly not in his right mind but physically the same, murdering him over and over in inventive ways.

"We are telling you this now so you can prepare."

The Paraffin blinked, his expression haunted. "Prepare? For what?"

Calchas gave him a grim look. "The terrible war over your mind, your body, and your soul." Kaltag's shoulders fell, defeated; Harry felt as if he couldn't breathe. "Golradir will stop at nothing until he takes you over. He will not tame, and would never submit to compromise." Kaltag looked away, his features paling every second.

"Surrender to him," Andromache spoke above a whisper, "And Harry Potter will surely die."

Though Harry was quite sick of hearing about his possible demise at the hands of his brother, he noticed the desperate gleam in Kaltag's eye slowly diminish, giving way to the determined, proud twinkle that he'd come to associate with the redhead. He allowed himself a small smile as Kaltagonus pursed his lips and squared his shoulders, his brow furrowing in a menacing manner. The Being stared at each council member equally.

"I won't let it come to that." He firmly said.

The Quintessence appeared genuinely surprised, as if they had expected him to fight harder. Harry never in a million years thought that he'd give in so easily as well. "That's it, boy." Agamemnon huskily replied. His smile was actually genuine and, for once, not sarcastic. The members seemed to regain some of their old confidence back, exchanging looks as Kaltagonus straightened himself.

"At this time, we have neither the resources nor the facility to prepare you in all aspects of your personality. When we do, you will be called." Hector's staid character returned full-force. "Steel yourself at all times to be summoned. You will know when you are ready."

Kaltag sniffed derisively, flicking invisible lint off his cuff. "I don't need training." Harry rolled his eyes, once again questioning how they were at all related. "I can handle all facets of Wisdom, Strength, Childishness," the Mycenaean king bristled with annoyance. "Trickery and ... whatever the last three of you are, just fine." He smirked, crossing his arms and daring them to argue. Harry barely raised a brow before he spotted a blur. Suddenly there was the blade of a sword pressed to the overconfident prefect's neck, with Achilles manning the hilt.

The Being's eyes widened in astonishment before following the shadowed blade with a wary eye. Achilles scoffed, leaning close to the Celestial's face. "You reek of hubris, boy..." Harry gawped when he pushed the blade down a bit harder, wringing a cautionary growl from the boy's throat. The golden-haired Greek's mouth stretched into a smirk as he pulled the sword a safe distance away, though still resting on Kaltag's neck. "But also of determination. If you had none to counter the former, your blood would have painted my sword. You will be trained."

Kaltagonus glared daggers at him and inspected his neck as the sword dissipated into a puff of smoke. Just as quickly as he had stepped down, Achilles was back in his rightful chair, smirking. "Arrogance, foolishness, determination and heart. A mighty match for Golradir you shall be."

"As I was saying," Hector threw the famed warrior a dirty look, "We cannot begin your training at this time. However, you will have assistance with the aspects of combative swordplay from your

realm." Kaltagonus and Harry stared at the Trojan expectantly.

"Androcles, son of Hephaistos." Achilles picked up. Harry's jaw dropped; he couldn't foresee any good coming out of this.

As expected, Kaltagonus objected. "What? Are you kidding me?"

"He is a descendant through his mother of my son, and so a descendant of me."

"So ... what?" The Being shrugged, obviously unhappy. "All those fights and insults were his way of showing he fancied me?"

Odysseus went on as if he hadn't heard him. "It is in his destiny that he will be a powerful asset to you; however, the task is up to you to approach him for assistance."

Kaltag's mouth fell open. "Tell me you're joking." His tone deadpanned.

"The sooner the better, boy." Agamemnon chuckled. Kaltag threw him a nasty look that Harry clearly perceived as 'I seriously hate you'.

"We have much to tell you and time is fleeting; we have kept you for far too long." Calchas called to attention, folding his wrinkly hands.

Kaltagonus gave him an incredulous look. "What, now you're worried about me dying out in the forest where you left me?" So that's where he was, Harry mused; not half passed out in a bathroom somewhere at the Three Broomsticks. How'd he wind up in the forest then?

"When Golradir makes his presence known, the barrier between your minds and souls will disappear. Thus begins the exchange."

"Dreams and memories of his lifetimes gone by will assail you, and vice versa, giving you both recollections and warnings," Calchas resumed. "It is at this time you must mind your forces, especially with him lurking about, struggling for control. They may increase exponentially, perhaps in sudden bursts, or not respond to your summons at all as they are only linked to you."

"It is best you do not use them at all." Penelope chimed. "Do not give him the ammunition he needs to take over."

"You must try to remain in control as often as you can. Failure to do so would unleash a power so great, Lord Voldemort and Prince Mystikos would be the least of our concerns."

Harry frowned at the admission while Kaltagonus appeared thoughtful and calculating. "You say my forces are linked to me," he began pensively, "as if I'd just stumbled upon them like an affected Celestial."

"In a way," Odysseus drew out, "you are."

Kaltag went stiff as if he'd been hit with a Full Body Bind. Harry had never seen him so rattled. Angry, yes; frustrated, often; annoyed? Every day. But Kaltagonus never looked this genuinely worked up.

"Are you saying," he slowly began, fists clenching, "that I'm a Celestial ... because of Golradir?" Harry waited with bated breath. Finally, Calchas nodded. Kaltag swallowed.

"Were it not for him, you would have been a powerful child, yes, with the possibility of an additional ability." Kaltag merely closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "It is rare, but not unheard of. Had you lived without his assistance, you would probably have made an excellent wizard."

The Paraffin slowly shook his head, opening his eyes to level his unsettled stare on the others. "And ... if Golradir ... goes away?"

The silence that met the Being's inquiry was deafening. It was all the answer they needed. Harry seized handfuls of hair, his mind reeling. A humorless laugh escaped Kaltag's lips. "Right."

"I understand very little of this makes sense — "

"Shocker." The Bring grumbled.

"—However, you will come to understand everything in time. For now, one last stipulation." Calchas's face darkened and Harry noticed his fingers tightened as he leaned forward. "Harry Potter can never know you are his brother."

Harry's jaw dropped. It was a bit late for that now, considering all that he had seen. And did they really expect Kaltagonus to just ignore the fact that his parents had another child that was viciously stolen from them?

Kaltag's eyes had widened and his tense expression slackened. "You can't be serious." He eyed Calchas and the rest of the stoic-faced Quintessence in turn. "You are!" He exclaimed, stunned. "You can't expect me to keep this from him! He has a right to know!"

"Kaltagonus—"

"Now, I can accept all the other terms, but this I won't allow! Now you're just being ridiculous!" The smoke wavered in the right corner furiously.

"We cannot risk agitating Harry Potter's destiny if he should find out the truth. One small aspect such as this can throw the war in a different and an incontestably more dangerous direction." Hector evenly explained. Kaltagonus just scoffed and threw him a dark look.

"Furthermore, if Golradir should learn of Harry Potter, he will seek him out first."

"I thought you said he was a mindless killer, so he shouldn't be seeking anyone out." Kaltag reminded.

Calchas nodded. "Correct, but now that he has this second chance he is loathe to waste it."

"What—what if I control him? Train him or something or you tell me how to keep him from finding out?" Kaltag's voice had taken on the desperate pitch once more. "You can't do this to him!"

"It is fate, Kaltagonus," Penelope firmly replied. "Tampering with it, even a bit, can diminish either side's advantage considerably. Harry Potter must never know."

Kaltagonus made a strangled noise at the back of his throat. "I can't believe you're making me do this to him! I-I-I can't look him in the face and pretend I don't know the truth! You've no right to ask that of me!" Harry was grateful the boy was defending him, almost like ...



he swallowed. Almost like a brother would have. "You don't know him; he can handle it, trust me!"

"Golradir!"

"Shut up!"

"Kaltagonus!" Calchas roared. "Enough! Now, the matter is not under negotiation. You will not reveal any of what you have learned tonight to Harry Potter or anyone else, or the consequences will be deeply unpleasant."

"Do we have your word?" Hector sternly intoned, weighing the obdurate Celestial down with his stare.

The Being glared at the gathered council angrily, slowly shaking his head. "This is wrong." He quietly accused. "This is all wrong. And cruel. Unbelievably heartless."

"Survival is heartless," Agamemnon boomed. "And well-suited for your character. You will soon discover that cruelty knows no bounds."

The Being pursed his lips, still upset. "I don't think I've ever met anybody as cruel as you all," he affronted, giving them each a dark look. "Not even Mystikos would be that merciless. I don't even think this is real anymore." He roughly mussed his hair. "Members of my soul wouldn't do such things to another person."

"Then perhaps you do not know your soul very well." Achilles countered.

Kaltagonus narrowed his eyes at the famed warrior and whispered, "Find yourself another lackey. If you're going to force me to do this, I'm through." Throwing a nasty glare at the rest of the council, Kaltagonus spun on his heel and walked toward the dark shadows behind him.

"Kaltagonus!"

"Let him be, Achilles," Calchas waved him back down in his seat with a somber face. Kaltag paused, half-turning to the Apollonian

Seer. Calchas inclined his head and folded his wrinkled hands. "Have you any last questions?"

The Being's scowling face fell and he stared at the spot where Harry was standing, thoughtful. His brow furrowed before his head shot up and he quietly replied, "Just one. How do I know this isn't all some ... hallucination? How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Harry's eyes darted to Odysseus, who chuckled rather loudly and replied, eyes glittering, "Our sincerity is as good as gold."

Both boys blinked, confused. "What—"

"Good fortune be with you, Kaltagonus." Calchas interrupted.

"No, what's he mean by—"

"The fight for your soul will now commence." Achilles firmly stated. "KRATISTO!"

"TO THE STRONGEST!" The Quintessence thundered as one. Kaltagonus' protests echoed throughout the clearing before he and his objections disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

It was as the minutes dragged by that Harry waited to follow him, but never did. It took a few moments for panic to settle in: he was stuck here! Stuck with straight-faced parts of Kaltag's soul that couldn't hear or see him! He cursed the damn General for catching him unawares and leaving him in seclusion somewhere in the castle. Was he ever going to wake up? Did someone have to find him and wake him up? Or would they just discover his corpse lying there in holey trousers and muddy shoes several years into the future?

Harry was about to scream and shout for all he was worth to somehow get the Quintessence's attention when Agamemnon brusquely accused, "And where have you been?" As one, the Quintessence swiveled to the right corner obscured by heavy clouds. Baffled, Harry followed their gaze and noticed a dark outline emerging from the foggy depths. His eyes widened when the hooded stranger came into view and his suspicions were confirmed.

"I have duties too, remember?" Spiridon drawled, pulling off his hood and crossing his arms. "I was tying up a few loose ends and making

sure things ran smoothly." His stern façade met Agamemnon's scowl in annoyance. "Really, none of your business, but I got here, didn't I?"

The Mycenaean king snorted. "I see where the boy gets his daring from now."

"A compliment, I'm sure." The General sneered before his expression turned serious.

"And the Potter boy?" Achilles rumbled. "What of him? Have you handled it?"

"He never made it to the production, but I would not worry," Harry's eyes widened at Spiridon's half-truth. "That boy's curiosity far outweighs his logic, so I've heard." Harry bristled, hands balling into fists. What he wouldn't do to tear that smirk off the bastard's face!

Achilles nodded. "Make sure of that."

Spiridon nodded once. "However, I reiterate my claim that this is not fair to him, keeping him from knowing the truth."

"He will learn of this in his own time." Agamemnon insisted.

"Yes," Calchas agreed. "Tampering with the future is a perilous affair." Spiridon narrowed his eyes, looking away from the Seer. Harry watched as the elder man's face contorted accusingly. "If you have done something stable-hand—"

"Nothing of significance," Spiridon waved dismissively, his eyes straying to the spot Kaltag had vanished from. "I only think the boy has a right to know."

Calchas looked incensed. "Sp—"

"The air is tight with forecast." Spiridon interrupted, squaring his shoulders. "The boy has probably put himself in danger, as it is. I've always had my suspicions about him."

This drew the council's full attention. "Oh?"

Spiridon nodded. "But I could be wrong. Reading an animal's emotions is quite common nowadays, wouldn't you say?" He leered in their direction, smirking at their looks of surprise. Harry seriously wanted to thrash him.

"You think Golradir has pervaded his mind?"

The General shook his head. "Just his magic."

"My magic?" Harry squeaked. He swallowed thickly as he stared at his arms and patted down his body, worried that he might have contracted some part of Golradir. If he was in his magic, judging by Kaltagonus' recent mood swings there was no telling what could happen to his abilities. He already had the sudden elemental development because of the parasite.

The council stared silently at Spiridon, whose mocking expression fell pensive and serious. "Do you think he knows?"

His inquiry was met with silence before Calchas replied, "He does not."

"Not yet."

Agamemnon narrowed his eyes at the dark-haired Celestial. "Well then, let us hope it remains as such."

Spiridon's brow raised a fraction. "You've kept your end of the bargain so far and my gratitude is extended forevermore regarding my threefold blessing."

"We have but one more request of you." Spiridon's eyebrow arched, a motion for the elder man to continue. "It is expected Kaltagonus will act brashly and reveal what he has learned tonight to Harry Potter."

The General paused, his brow lowering. "You want me to make sure that does not happen."

"Yes." Harry glared at the old Seer, wishing for once that looks could kill. "By any means necessary." Spiridon's eyes flickered, but gave nothing away.

"Once again, I'll have to employ drastic measures, possibly hurting both of them in the long run. The last thing I want to do is ruin their lives."

"It is the will of the Fates." Calchas firmly replied in a be-all, end-all tone.

Spiridon frowned. "The Fates have been very cruel to these boys, working through my hands." He released a weary sigh, crossing his arms and leaning against the hazy platform. "A thousand apologies, Mercy, though your forgiveness will never come." Harry narrowed his eyes as another shadowy figure glided in the fog beside the dark-haired General, coming to a halt beside him; he avoided their gaze as if he feared them. Harry's eyes widened and his heart stopped as he realized why.

"We'll see," said none other than Lily Potter, her voice cool. "We'll see."

"Mum?" Harry said in a strained whisper, shocked when he was drawn into her identical green gaze. Before he could wonder whether she'd actually seen him or not, his sight was clouded with darkness.

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A deep groan rumbled through Harry's thoughts and the darkness gave way to filtered moonlight. He was in the forest? How did he wind up there? He felt a force shake his head and his eyes roll around in his sockets to study his surroundings more. He was at the base of a very tall tree, staring up at a low-slung branch. Long fingers pressed against his temple and it was as he tried to get up that he felt a slight weight on his chest. Harry blinked, focusing on the white figure with large eyes staring down at him.

He mouth opened to ask, "Argentum?" In a voice not his own. This was when Harry Potter officially began to panic.

He had no control of Kaltagonus' body and he wasn't in his own. What the hell had been done to him? Was he really dead? Did Spiridon make him see those memories because he knew the spell would kill him? Or did something go awry with the spell and he was now stuck forever in the tetchy Being's body? Oh God, was he

another Quirrel? Would he sprout out the back of Kaltag's head and be forced under a turban for the rest of his life, too? Harry didn't want to be stuck under a turban! Could Kaltagonus even sense him, did he know he was there? Most importantly, would he ever get out?

Harry watched Kaltag's arm bat the owl away and wondered if he could displace himself as he unknowingly did while with the Quintessence. He wasn't at all comfortable without some semblance of control over his own body. The Gryffindor flinched as Kaltag's hand rubbed at a spot on his forehead. "Ouch," he cringed, though Harry could feel nothing. "Bloody forest," Kaltag's eyes sought out the bird and Harry could almost feel his gaze burning into the owl. "Bloody bird. Why'd you have to take off like that?"

Argentum only hooted in response. The Being grumbled as he pressed the heel of his palm into what Harry assumed was a bump. "When I get my hands on you, you're pillow feathers, you hear me? Pillow feathers." Argentum gave a warbling hoot that sounded vaguely like laughter. "A pillow with your beak as a nutcracker, and ... oh, cripes! Speaking of nutcrackers, Ella's going to kill me!"

The prefect was immediately on his feet, brushing dead leaves and dirt off his clothes, ready to march through the forest. Harry felt mild disorientation with the movement, and by the way Kaltagonus was clinging to the tree for dear life he'd probably felt the brunt of it. "She's probably in Hogsmeade by now. Why'd you run off like that?" He said this to the owl. "Now I've got this whopping bruise on my face that makes Quasimodo look like Prince Charming and a bloody dream about..."

Harry could almost hear the boy's eyelids creaking from opening so wide. "Harry," the Celestial breathed, his knuckles white from grasping the tree so hard. "It's a dream. It had to be a dream," he repeated, swinging his vision from left to right so fast Harry was beginning to feel nauseous. "This whole Golradir and Harry thing is a hallucination. Yes, that's it. I bumped my head, so it couldn't have been real ... right?" He posed to the owl.

Harry was righteously vindicated when Argentum ruffled his feathers and clapped his beak noisily. "You don't think so?" Argentum shook himself.

"Then if I ... if I told you Har-Harry's my ... my ... brother ... ?" Harry felt something coil in his stomach at those words. Suddenly, Argentum spread his wings and fluttered down from his perch to peck at Kaltag's robe pockets. "Ow! Ouch! Oi, you bloody pigeon, lay off!" But Argentum kept at it, nipping insistently at a pocket as he struggled to stay aloft. "Okay, okay, okay, okay!" Kaltag growled, pushing him aside.

Harry watched as the Being fished into said pocket and froze. The distinct crinkling of parchment could be heard and slowly, Kaltag's hand emerged with a balled up paper. Fingers trembling, Harry held his breath as the Being calmly unfolded the message, flattening it out. As he angled it in the moonlight, Harry could make out three loopy words:

Go to him.

As soon as Kaltag's eyes ran over the words, the slip of parchment vanished. When next they looked up, Argentum, too, had disappeared. "What is going on around here?" The Being whispered, freeing a shaky breath as he hung onto the trunk for support. Harry wished he could tell what the boy was thinking, for indeed he had to be, standing in silence for such a long stretch of time. He was startled when Kaltagonus made a determined sound and declared into the night, "I must be going mad. Forgive me, El." With that, he let go of the tree and marched onward.

The world, Harry noticed, was a lot taller from Kaltag's point of view. Granted, he was only a few inches shorter than the redhead, but it seemed like feet. However he didn't envy the boy for the amount of times he had to duck several branches, bat away ridiculously large spider webs, and yank his cloak from prickly bush thorns. The Being grumbled and cursed to himself, stumbling over rotted fallen trees and large roots and wrenching his robes off and throwing them over his shoulder when they snagged for the fifth time. A sigh of relief came a few minutes later when the wood began to thin out.

"Finally! Ruddy waste of feathers," he growled of his owl. "He could've at least pointed me—"

He froze on the spot at the sound of a twig snapping. Harry sat back as the Being stared into the surrounding darkness, seeking out the noise.

"Hello?" He whispered into the night. Silence.

Kaltag swung his head back and forth, his hand balling into a fist; Harry thought he saw a faint flash of flame in his hand. "Argentum?" The Celestial's eyes strayed to the canopy, before doing one last sweep of the forest. Harry dimly felt the redhead's eyes narrow, his ear straining against the silence, before he continued on. "Great. Not only am I crazy, but I'm paranoid, too. Brilliant, now I'm talking to myself." Harry snorted, wanting to shake his head at the Being's antics but since he couldn't, he resigned himself to mentally sighing.

Before the Being could utter another complaint, a sudden force threw him off his feet, and Harry could only sit back and watch in alarm as Kaltagonus landed hard on the ground with a groan. Harry felt the boy's body rumble with a cough and turn over, his eyes zipping around in the darkness. Kaltag scrambled to stand, only to again be struck back down on his knees.

His blue eyes locked on a vague shadow flitting between the trees and Harry became aware of the warmth spreading through Kaltag's body. The Gryffindor was beginning to get dizzy from Kaltag's eyes darting around the dim area so fast until the moon briefly lit a figure in the shadows and Kaltag hurled a sizzling orb at it. The orb missed its mark and crackled as it collided with a tree instead. "Where are you?" Kaltag yelled into the night. "Show yourself!"

Another green orb was in hand as a giggle echoed through the gloom, and leaves rustled behind the Celestial. "I'm warning you..." he growled, and Harry could tell he meant business; the energy orb had blazed into a fireball and grown, matching Kaltag's temper. Silence reigned throughout the Dark Forest, only serving to heighten Harry's panic. If the forest was this silent, it only meant something incredibly awful was yet to come. He wasn't disappointed.

A snarl suddenly broke the uncanny stillness and Harry was abruptly jarred from his thoughts as someone or something slammed into Kaltag's body, but yanked him back roughly before he hit the ground. All the same, Kaltag was seized from behind and rendered immobile. Harry tensed at the cool air a sinister chuckle puffed in the Being's ear.



"Daft boy! Didn't your mum ever tell yeh wha' happens when yeh play with fire?" Harry was shocked to realize the gravelly voice was that of a female. Kaltag growled, struggling to knock the strange woman's arm from around his neck to no avail; Harry could feel the strength in her grip.

The leaves to their right crunched Harry felt both his and Kaltag's surprise when another figure came into view, a stunning dark-skinned woman with waves of hair dark as midnight and intense lavender eyes. Harry briefly felt the makings of desire overwhelm him (or was it Kaltag's reaction?) as she sweetly smiled, her smooth hand gliding up Kaltag's arm.

Her moonlit eyes rooted theirs to the spot as one hand traveled to the redhead's shoulder and the other curled over Kaltag's wrist. Harry's thoughts were clouded with longing, craving her, aching with want, hungering for this woman who, though graceful, had to be twice his age, but he didn't question. This wasn't like the Veela allure that he'd read about or felt on occasion; this was very different. He needed her. He strained against Kaltag straining against the other holding him hostage. Nothing could keep him from having this woman. That was, until she opened her mouth.

Harry froze at the sight of two large canines and two rows of sharp teeth. The dark woman laughed at what was probably the horrified expression on Kaltag's face. "You get burned." She hissed, slapping the fireball from the Celestial's hand. It ignited the brush as soon as it dropped to the ground, but a large, many-footed mass stamped it out before it could spread any further. Kaltag hardly paid attention to the fact that more people had joined as he was thrashing violently beneath the vampiric women's hold.

"Lively bugger, innit?" The one with the grating voice told her companion. Harry shuddered as he felt the unmistakable swipe of a tongue at Kaltag's neck. "Mm," the unseen woman groaned, her pointed teeth scraping across the skin just above the redhead's collar. "Tastes divine, too. I haven't had a rising Celestial bloke in weeks, Mona. Just a bite?"

"Absolutely not." A new voice growled as the one called Mona opened her mouth to reply. Kaltag was forcibly turned by the women toward the new voice and groaned.

"Well, this evening just keeps getting better." He derisively grunted, scowling at the grinning visage of Mystikos. He gave an undignified yelp as the unknown vampire cuffed him with her elbow and dragged him over to the Dark Prince.

Mystikos' face twisted into what could be a concerned look, but the aged brown scars that riddled his face and his darkened, remarkably animalistic features made it into something more menacing. He extended his hand to cup Kaltag's chin, but the vampire's grasp allowed just enough room for him to jerk his head away. "Forgive them, beloved," Mystikos went on as he somewhat fondly fixed Kaltag's haphazard state of dress. "They are Daimones; they do not know better."

"Watch yerself there," the vampire with the tight grip and the native accent sneered.

The Dark Being smirked and nodded toward the older vampire. "You have heard of Desdemona, my son; the leader of the Lamiai and Empousai clans. The mouthy one is her second, Jools Joyce of the English Empousai." He scorned, frowning when Kaltag gasped as she tightened her grasp.

"It's Jojo Six, m'sweet boy," she grunted in his ear. "Not that weak brand those spineless humans tagged me with centuries ago." Both Harry and Kaltag winced as she nosed at his ear and whined. "Just a taste, Mona, please!"

At Mystikos' growl, Mona gave her second-in-command a sharp look. "Down, Jojo. Perhaps later." Kaltag wriggled more fiercely as an odious stench filled his nose, and Harry spotted the dark, hideous figures of Mystikos' Hybrids over his shoulder.

He turned to a particularly grotesque one (but really, Harry thought, none of them were at all nice-looking) and murmured, "Alert the others of our location, Csotzt." With an affirmative snarl, the creature fell on all fours and dashed toward an orange light in the distance. "I must say, I never anticipated that we would meet tonight, beloved."

"Yeah, fancy that," Kaltag sarcastically spat, a flame flaring in his hand again.

The Dark Being merely smiled at the boy's defiance, crossing the short distance to the resistant teen and the vampires. "Peace, Kaltagonus." He pacified, leaning close to the redhead's face.

Harry watched helpless as the dark-haired man's eyes twinkled forebodingly and his chest expanded before he released a deep, soothing breath. The Gryffindor felt Kaltag's eyes widen as the familiar wisp of smoke glided from the Being's nose and mouth, washing over Kaltag's face and obscuring his view. Kaltag tried to fight it, closing his throat and jerking against the women's strong grasp, but he couldn't hold his breath for long. The smoke lingered, as if knowing he was about to give way, when Kaltag grimaced, and inhaled a lungful of the cloud.

Harry immediately felt the effects of the crippling smoke: Kaltag's body wrung tight for a few moments, still trying to wrench himself from the vampires' grip, but Harry could see his strength failing him. "N-no..." the Celestial sluggishly whispered, his eyes drooping.

Finally, Kaltag succumbed, sagging between the vampires, Compelled. A slight heave from his chest emitted an answering puff of gold smoke, and Harry knew he was completely at the dark creatures' mercy.

"Come, give him to me," Mystikos' voice sounded muddled and distant, though he was right in front of him. Harry felt Kaltag's body being passed to the Dark Being, flipped and pressed into the man's broad chest. Blurry eyes got a brief view of the two vampires, Jojo's olive face marred by a disappointed frown before Mystikos' rumbling voice fluctuated between obscenely loud and very muted. "The Compulsion will bind his forces long enough for us to make our escape."

"Escape?" A throaty new voice questioned. "I think not. We still have work to do."

When Mystikos bodily turned with the lax redhead in his hands, Harry was both grateful and dismayed when Kaltagonus groggily raised his eyes to study the new person: the incredibly pale, jagged-toothed, nearly unrecognizable half-beast half-man creature with the intense scarlet gaze.

If there was ever a time he didn't want to deal with Voldemort, this was certainly that time.

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Harry woke with a start, gasping for breath as his eyes bulged and his head felt uncomfortably squeezed, as if it had just been put through a vice. He groaned, trying to remember what happened when his scar gave a sharp twinge of pain. It came back to him in a flood of memories.

Kaltag. His mother. Kaltag was his brother. Voldemort was here. Voldemort was here!

With an alarmed huff Harry frantically searched around in the darkness. His hands instantly slapped at his pockets, panicking when he didn't feel his wand. Clambering to his knees, Harry patted the carpet below him as he crawled, fingers touching nothing but dusty fabric.

"Lumos!" He hissed, sighing in relief when the wand tip lit up a few feet from where he was lying. He snatched it up and stood to his feet, dashing out from the hideaway corridor and running full-speed down the main hallway. He had to get Kaltagonus out of there. Granted, he was dimly aware he was no match for two vampires, two Hybrids, maybe a handful of Death Eaters, Mystikos and Voldemort ... but he had to try.

Harry flew through the corridors at such a speed he made it to the entrance hall in record time. He heard the muffled voices of the play behind the Great Hall doors as he passed, and briefly wondered whether or not to round up Ron and Hermione to back him, but decided against it. Harry realized if he'd gone in the Great Hall in the middle of the drama, one of the professors—named McGonagall—would definitely keep him from leaving again. With an apologetic frown at the dining hall, the wizard proceeded to the front doors, thankful that they hadn't shut the front doors of the castle.

He skidded to a halt at the top of the steps, catching his breath for a moment. As he paused at the doorway, Harry was shocked to find he wasn't the only one not attending the drama as he spotted a familiar mane of red hair.

"Oh, hello, Harry," Ella waved, meeting Harry with a smile halfway up the steps. "I bet you're wondering what I'm doing out here: all dressed up, I might add." She gestured to her polished appearance.

Breathing hard, Harry ran a hand through his rumpled hair. "Actually—"

"I'm here to see a man about a winged horse ride," she continued, grinning. Her grin soon turned into a frown. "A man who's incredibly late." She glanced at her wristwatch and her frown deepened. "Have you seen Kaltag? He was supposed to meet me at half eight. I've been here over half an hour."

Couldn't she see he could barely catch his breath and in a hurry? "Sorry Ella, but I have to ... did you say half an hour?" Harry incredulously asked. "It seems like it's been a lot longer than that."

The Gryffindor shook her head. "No. It's been thirty minutes. Why, did he send you?" Her gaze immediately turned suspicious.

Harry's eyes widened and he shook his head vehemently. "What? No, no—"

"He did, didn't he?" Ella continued, wound up. "He's sent you to tell me he's backed out? Coward. Typical boy!" Harry blinked at the accusation, confused. He now knew what was meant by women being more complicated than men. He would never have made that giant leap in a conversation.

"No, no, no, no, no, you've got it all wrong—"

"I can't believe he sent you to do his dirty work and break it off!" Ella raved, practically foaming at the mouth in anger as she paced the stairs. "Who does he think he is? He'll be begging for my forgiveness when I get my hands on his scrawny ar—"

"I don't have time for this!"

"I'll bet he's sitting back in the Great Hall and laughing about this with his stupid little friends!" Harry groaned in frustration, pulling at tufts of hair. Ella spun on her heel and rounded on him, poking him sharply in the shoulder. "And I'll wager you're in on this! You're all in on this! I knew this was a conspiracy—!"

"Oi!" Harry shouted, effectively shutting her up. "Look, Kaltag isn't in the castle. I..." Harry bit his lip, unsure whether to tell her anything or not. But, his common sense far outweighed his loyalties on this one: two against six (and undoubtedly more) were far better odds than one against six. "...I think Kaltag's run into some trouble. In the forest," he quickly stated as she opened her mouth to interrupt. "From what I gather, Mystikos and Voldemort have arrived with an entourage."

Stepping closer to the rapidly paling witch, Harry grabbed her shoulders, looking her intently in the eye. "I need you to go into the Great Hall and warn Professor Dumbledore. I don't care if you have to run in there and scream in the middle of the third act, just tell him Voldemort is here."

Ella's gaping mouth snapped shut and her brow creased. "What are you talking about? I'm coming with you."

Harry's eyebrows shot toward his hairline. "What? I don't think so."

The redhead's face didn't lose an ounce of certainty and determination. "Yes, I am. And if you're implying that my staying here would be safer because I'm a girl—"

"I never said that!"

"—Or if my blatant femininity would be a distraction—"

"You're seriously getting into this now?" Harry disbelievingly hissed. He couldn't believe she was picking a fight with him. Of all the times they could have done this, she chose right now! Stifling a noise of irritation Harry growled, "Look, someone has to tell Dumbledore and I know where they're holding Kaltag. It's only convenient—"

"You're not going there alone, Harry," Ella firmly replied. "I'm not going to sit back while they're doing God-knows-what to my b—with Kaltag. I'm going and that's final." She descended the stairs in a dogged fashion. "We'll send a Messenger to the castle once we've reached."

Staring at the witch's back with his jaw hanging, Harry gripped his wand, praying for control not to just curse the witch and be done

with it. His head was throbbing, and at once he knew that it wasn't just because of Voldemort. "Are you insane? We can't just—"

"What's all the fuss out here?" The sixth years jumped at the accusing tone, Harry sighing in relief when he realized it was only Arthur Gilliam, the Paraffin's Sliatyckx captain, standing in the doorway by the shadows. Gilliam eyed each of them with distaste. "Oh. It's just you, Potter."

"Good. Send him off, Harry, and we'll go." Ella ordered, crossing her arms and daring to be disobeyed. Seeing no way out of it, Harry faced the scowling brunette.

Gilliam's eyebrow rose. "Shouldn't you sixies be at the drama?"

"Shouldn't you mind your own business?" Ella returned with a scowl. Harry intercepted before they could argue.

"Gilliam, go in there, find a professor or one of the headmasters; tell them a student's in trouble."

The seventh year gave Harry a nasty look and sneered, "Why should I? You both look fine to me, unfortunately."

"Just go!" Harry barked, his patience gone. He clambered down the steps and took off down the path with Ella at a brisk pace, ignoring the fanatical captain's dark expression.

The pair jogged between the thestral-drawn carriages in silence, wands out and ears open. As they sidestepped steaming piles of compost, Harry heard, "How do you know he's in trouble?"

Harry made a misstep and nearly found himself ankle-deep in thestral droppings. "My head hurts when Voldemort's nearby." He stated, hoping it'd be enough.

"Is it your scar?" She questioned. Harry threw her a hesitant look over his shoulder. "My mum was a psychomediwitch." She quietly explained. Harry gave her a curt nod as they picked up the pace toward the gates. "How do you know he has Kaltag?"

Harry froze, cursing himself for not thinking up a proper lie in time. "I ... I see things," he replied, hoping not to sound too ridiculous. "When my scar hurts, I, er ... I can see what Voldemort's ... doing."

To her credit, she didn't seem fazed and just nodded. The short chat ended when the Gryffindors stopped at the entrance, locked in by the gate. Harry stalked to the iron bars and shook the barrier with force, giving an aggravated grunt when it didn't budge. "They locked it! They bloody locked the gate!"

"Calm down," the witch mollified, rapping her wand against her bottom lip. "An Alohomora probably wouldn't be effective on this. We'll have to find another way."

"How?" Harry growled, gesturing wildly at the forest nearby. "He's somewhere in the forest! D'you know how big the Dark Forest is?" Ella gave him a black look through her mask of dread.

"Surely there's a spell to find him? The Four-Point spell, maybe?"

"No, that'd just tell us where north is, not Kaltagonus." Ella slumped.

"I don't want to wait for the professors," she admitted in defeat, "but I don't think we'll be of much help to him now, since we don't know where he is." Harry sighed stubbornly, refusing to give up so easily. He raked his mind for clues as to where Kaltagonus could be. His head snapped up as he dimly remembered before Kaltag was captured that the forest had begun to thin down and he could see light in the distance.

"Hogsmeade," he whispered, pressing his face between the cool bars of the gate, trying to catch a glimpse of the village. "I thought I saw some lights from Hogsmeade. He can't be too far from there."

Ella nodded. "But how do we get there?" Harry's eyes glanced back at the carriages. Ella turned and followed his gaze only to shake her head negatively. "The thestrals are magically hooked to the wagons. There's no way we can dismantle the spells in time to fly."

Harry ran his hand through his hair and kicked at the dirt near the gate bars. There had to be some way to get there; though with all the time they'd already wasted, who's to say Voldemort and company hadn't already disappeared? But the dull pounding in his



forehead crushed that notion. Harry dug the toe of his trainers into the ground, thinking.

Ensedius? No. By the time they found the winged beast, the professors would have already arrived. Going into the forest and hoping for the best? Not possible. He refused to acknowledge the merit of Ella's suggestion; he would not wait around for the professors and leave his brother to suffer Voldemort's cruelty.

"Enough with the dirt already, you're kicking me under a mound!" Ella complained, shaking the earth from her shoes.

Harry could've slapped himself for his stupidity. Of course! He could travel under the gates! Why didn't he think of it before? As Ella's complaints found his ears, Harry decided to quash the niggling voice in the back of his head questioning whether she could be trusted. "Ella," he began, tucking his wand in his jeans, "I've got an idea for how to get us out of here, but you have to promise me two things."

Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded nonetheless. "Promise me you won't tell anyone about this."

"Tell anyone what?"

"You'll see," Harry dismissively stated. "Just promise me you'll not tell anyone."

She shrugged. "Torture notwithstanding, I promise." She hopped on the balls of her feet, as anxious as Harry felt.

"Okay," Harry sighed, taking a deep breath. "And second ... promise me you won't panic?" Her eyes widened in alarm. "Yes, like that. You're panicking, stop panicking, I haven't even told you yet." He wryly commented. The witch's mouth worked as if she wanted to say something but thought better of it. She nodded at Harry, and the green-eyed wizard took this as confirmation.

Without giving her a chance to reconsider, Harry slid his hand in Ella's and tried to recall everything he felt when he first traveled. Well, he was frightened that Kaltag was going to pound him into the ground. He felt not so much cold as chilled, though the warm, slightly sweaty hand in his and the pain in his scar was certainly distracting. Silence, which he already had, and wet; he remembered

feeling somewhat wet, wet and weightless. And then there was the sight of dirt all around him when he opened his eyes, but Harry could still feel the dry air blowing across his face.

"Harry?"

"Mm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Concentrating." He tersely replied, deeply thinking of a cool, wet place where he felt weightless.

There was a pause, followed by, "You do realize Kaltag could be long gone by the time you stop 'concentrating'?"

Harry gave her an annoyed glower. "I'm trying."

"Well, could you please try a little harder?" She snapped.

Harry felt his brow crease in annoyance. "Maybe I'd be able to if you'd stop whinging." He coolly returned. He suppressed the urge to smirk at her scandalized expression.

"Did ... whinging? Did you just call me a whinger? Why, you—!"

Ella's protests were cut off by her scream when they began to sink into the ground. Harry opened his eyes at the feeling of light sensation and was pleased to see the seemingly endless brown void around him. He struggled to keep them translucent and held his breath, not wanting to kill himself before he could run to Kaltag's aid. Keeping a tight hold of the frightened witch's hand, Harry urgently focused on moving.

Move forward, move forward. He could still feel Ella trying to jerk her hand out of his, but he squeezed her fingers. Move forward, travel. Move forward, move forward. Ella's hand was beginning to slip out of his, and he could just barely feel the earth pressing down on him. Move forward! Move forward! Harry could taste the soil in his mouth now and he was starting to feel heavier than before. He could only feel Ella's moist index finger being crushed in his hand and it was fast slipping away. No! Move forward! FORWARD!

Suddenly, Harry felt the buoyant sensation briefly return before they both were slingshot forward, shuddering as they passed through the wards. UP! UP! UP! Harry frantically thought, relief flooding his mind as he felt his body zooming upward to break through the ground. As his head broke the surface, the first sounds he heard were of Ella's fearful gasps and jabbers.

Harry breathed the clean air and yanked his free arm from the ground and pushed himself up now that the solid feeling was returning full force. Finally, the traveling sensation ended when his knees were aboveground, and he had to heave the rest of his body out, leaving a messy crater behind. Shaking the dirt from his hair and wiping at the lenses of his glasses, Harry spat out a mouthful of dirt and then focused his efforts on pulling Ella out of the ground, stumbling when she was finally free. The witch sputtered, coughing out mud and grass as she fruitlessly tried to brush the filth off her clothes. As she shook globs of mud from her hair, Harry could decipher a murderous look directed at him from beneath her muddy face.

The Gryffindor shrugged, pulling out his wand to cast a mild Cleaning Spell on his glasses. "I told you not to panic." He ducked the swipe she took at him and hurried down the path, shaking the dirt out of his trousers. "Come on, we've got to get to Hogsmeade."

"But even if we do get there," Ella yelled to his retreating back, "how do we find Kaltagonus? He's bound to be anywhere!"

"Then we'll search everywhere," Harry called back. "We'll find him."

"Harry, stop!" Ella cried out, seizing the back of his robes when they were in reach. Harry jerked to a halt. "We've got to think this through," she replied to his angry look. "We can't just barge in unprepared."

"We don't have time!"

"And we'll only waste it if we just run into the forest with our heads cut off!" she countered, biting her lip. "Now I've got an idea." Harry gruffly exhaled as Ella pulled out her wand and aimed it in the direction of the school. "Sorry about this. Accio Argentum!"

A full minute later a whitish-silver blur zoomed from one of the tallest towers of the school, growing bigger and bigger until a large ball of feathers was caught by Ella. Argentum squawked indignantly, pecking viciously at the witch's hands and ruffling his feathers indignantly. "Ouch! Sorry, but—ow! Kaltag's in danger and we needed your help." The owl's attack abruptly stopped and large yellow eyes fixed on her as if weighing the truth of her apology.

"Argentum, please." Harry stepped up, dimly aware that he was pleading with an owl. The silver bird's head pivoted in his direction and Harry felt unsettled under the owl's scrutiny. With one last fluff of his chest and rumpling of his feathers, Argentum screeched in the affirmative. The Gryffindors sighed in relief, and Ella released her hold on the owl. With a resolved hoot, Argentum spread his wings and took to the sky with Harry and Ella trailing behind.

They followed the usual path to Hogsmeade before Argentum darted into the dark forest. Ella hesitated for a split second before crossing into the forest with Harry. They were immediately assaulted with brambles and jagged branches that tore at their clothing. "I think—ow!—he's getting his revenge—blech!—on us now!" Ella whispered as she ripped the hem of her skirt from a prickly bush's grip. Harry hissed in agreement as a large twig in the shape of a clawed hand scratched at his face. He paused to whisper a Dampening Spell on their robes and the crunch of leaves and brush beneath their shoes died into silence.

Harry was flooded with relief when he could hear muffled voices just beyond the thick trunks of the trees, and spied the distant orange light from Hogsmeade village. Argentum flapped overhead and alighted on a branch, staring down at them as if to say, I got you this far: now you're on your own. Harry nodded in thanks to the owl and motioned for Ella to stay close.

Ducking at the waist, Harry pulled out his wand and skulked toward a low hedge in the shadows, just tall enough to block them from view and close enough to eavesdrop on the group of dark beings. The Gryffindors crouched and peered through the foliage, Harry's eyes widening when he counted three Death Eaters added to the assembly. His brow furrowed when he didn't spot Kaltag right away, but his hand flew out just in time to cover Ella's mouth, stifling her gasp of shock just as the pain in his scar intensified.

Voldemort had blocked their view, but when he moved, the sight was startling. Mystikos still held tightly to Kaltagonus, who looked bruised and fatigued but defiant. Harry was glad to see that he had broken the Compulsion and was now glaring at the snarling, beastly Dark Lord.

The dark wizard's teeth looked like they had been filed into sharp points, and his lips and gums were black, contrasting highly with his colorless face. The skin of his brow appeared to have hardened into a permanent frown, making his vibrant red eyes stand out more. The slits for a nose now protruded somewhat into the form of a small snout, as sharp and pointed as his teeth. Not to mention the parallel ridging on either side of his head, looking as if he were also about to sprout horns. Sirius had been right: Voldemort definitely looked less human than before.

The man was now more than ever the physical embodiment a nightmare.

"I will not ask you again," even the dark wizard's tone was harsher, throatier than Harry was used to. Voldemort stepped closer to Kaltag and hissed, "Where are Youngblood's weapons?"

Harry wrapped his other arm tightly around Ella as Voldemort squeezed Kaltag's jaw between his clawed fingers. The Gryffindor felt a swell of triumph in him as the Being's blue eyes held the boldest insolence. "How should I know?"

"My sources tell me you were present at the Hollows venture," the wizard evenly replied nodding toward Hryczuk. "'Little boy with red hair and the senselessness of a Gryffindor'. What's more, you are lying." The Dark Lord made a show of sniffing the air around Kaltagonus. "Your scent tells me you are lying about the Hollows endeavor."

Kaltag let out a rough snort. "'Endeavor'? You put it so generously. It was more of a fiasco, really," the boy crookedly smirked. "A humiliating catastrophe; in short, a failure. Then again, what d'you expect from a so-called dark lord who couldn't even manage to bump off a toddler?"

Voldemort returned Kaltag's smug smile and stated, "Rodolphus."

Harry pulled the red-haired witch to his chest as she made to lunge for the clearing when Kaltag doubled over from the sturdy Death Eater's vicious blow. He ignored her dark look and cringed as the entire gathering snickered balefully. Kaltag groaned when Mystikos pulled him closer and rolled his head away from the man's mouth to his ear. "Quite a mouth you've on you, my beloved boy." Kaltag resisted his hold but was securely seized by the Dark Prince.

"I say we kill the little know-it-all: slowly," Jojo proposed, licking her lips and sneering. "I get first blood." At Mona's snarl, the young Empousa slightly cowered and lowered her gaze. "After you, o' course."

The mahogany-skinned Lamia raised her chin haughtily as she traced a path over Kaltag's lips. Harry's fingers tautened around his wand, ready to interfere at any time. "I myself don't have much use for his mouth." She squeezed his jaw and chuckled vindictively. "Except I would rip his tongue from his mouth and feast on it, just to watch the terror bloom behind his pretty, pretty eyes. Red looks good next to pale blue skin, yes?" Jojo nodded enthusiastically as the others laughed. "You'd look good in red and death, boy."

"There is purpose for him yet, alive," Voldemort stated, his black lips slanted in a leer. The Celestial's pained blue eyes rested on the Dark Lord. He continued in a disparaging tone, "He could put that sharp tongue of his to better use. My Death Eaters would undeniably find relief through his body." It could only have been anger and sheer impulse to cause Kaltagonus to act so foolishly in the next second.

For the ginger-haired Being gave the Dark Lord a withering look, right before he spat in his face. Harry couldn't have been more shocked.

Before the other Death Eaters could react, Voldemort's wand had sliced through the air and a nasty scarlet beam shot out of his wand. "Everbero!"

Kaltagonus released a gut-wrenching howl as the spell hit him with full force, making even Mystikos stumble from its intensity. The Being coughed violently and audibly winced with each forceful movement. Mystikos held tight to his wrists, holding the boy's full

weight when Kaltagonus' knees buckled and he hacked up a shiny crimson gob at his feet.

Harry stared in horror, too frozen to jump into action. Voldemort wiped at his face with an offered handkerchief from one the Death Eaters, and Harry could feel his magic thrumming even in the distance.

"You repulsive little waste of magic," he gutturally growled, forcibly squeezing Kaltag's chin between his fingers, smearing the trickle of blood on the boy's chin across his jaw line. Voldemort stood so close to him his snout was pressed against Kaltag's temple.

"For that, I will make you serve me: you will be disgraced by me," he jerked Kaltag's jaw roughly with emphasis, "remade to serve me, and you will be mine to give to others as I see fit. If one does not break you, the others are bound to." Spittle spewed from the Dark Lord's lips as he spoke, black fluid splattered along the side of the Paraffin's face. He looked more animal than human in this moment. "In all ways I will despoil you, and you would have brought it on yourself, Muggle-reared, when you dared to cross me!"

With an animalistic grunt, Voldemort released his grip on Kaltag's face and stepped back to aim his wand at him. "Crucio!"

At Kaltag's first roar of pain, Harry found his arms unexpectedly empty. He cursed as Ella hurdled through the hedge and pointed her wand at the Dark Lord and followed her with his wand at the ready. The Death Eaters quickly had theirs out and the Hybrid bodyguards raised their swords; the vampires rounded out the group, and they just stood there, looking intimidating.

"Let him go!" Ella screamed, her face the epitome of wrathful retaliation despite the obvious advantage of the other group's size.

"Ooh, dessert!" Jojo exclaimed as she wet her fangs. "I'll take the pretty little girl, Mona. I want her. Red is so pretty on her."

"Just try it you blood-sucking hag." Ella snarled.

"Feisty!" The brunette laughed, swiping away a line of dribble on her chin. As she made to step toward the aggressive witch, Mona grabbed the back of her shabby coat and restrained her.

"Stop it, you monster!" Ella shouted at the Dark Lord, who wore a fanatical grin at Kaltag's thrashes and screams, still being held by a stoic Mystikos.

Kaltag's convulsions and cries of torment came to a halt as Voldemort calmly turned around to glower at the pair in annoyance. His irritation quickly morphed to glee when he noticed Harry beside the witch. "Well, well, Harry Potter: what a delightful surprise. You have my sincere gratitude for avoiding the bothersome task of finding you. When it comes to killing you, I can be very impatient."

"Leave him alone." Harry demanded. "It's me you want."

"While you are correct," Voldemort replied, baring his blackened teeth, "That, however, does not mean I cannot enjoy myself before destroying you." He affably drawled.

Harry gripped Ella's arm firmly as she made to rashly step forward. "I mean it, let him go. He's done nothing but be honest with you. It's not his fault you can't handle the truth, so set him free."

Voldemort arched a non-existent brow at the dark-haired teenager. He turned to Kaltagonus and cupped his chin; the Being didn't protest, practically leaning on Mystikos for support as shuddered with the aftereffects from the Cruciatus.

"What does the boy mean to you, Potter, that you would hasten your imminent demise? Hm, Harry?" He idly questioned, grazing the moaning Celestial's cheek with a pointed talon pensively. "What ... does ... this ... boy," Kaltag winced as Voldemort stressed his words by poking his yew wand in the Being's battered stomach, "Mean to you?" Sharp red eyes pierced through Harry's.

"He is merely another full-blooded creation because his stupid parents were bored enough to conceive him," Voldemort continued conversationally.

"Insult the professed sire all you want," Mystikos cut in, "but do not slight the name of my beloved intended."

Voldemort gave his ally a contemptuous look before he faced the Gryffindors. "No talent, no promise, no future," he smirked derisively



in Kaltag's drawn face and gave his flushed cheeks two slapping pats. "He is nothing, Potter. You are wasting your time."

"Then I'll waste it," Harry returned, scowling, "but let him go." He met Kaltag's eyes as the boy weakly raised his head, surprise flickering in his eyes as if he had just noticed them.

"Ah, heroes and their innocents. It's quite sickening." Voldemort scoffed. "What is it with the Good rescuing those of no great significance?"

"It's called loyalty, a device used by real friends," Harry mocked, his eyes darting to the trio of Death Eaters as their wands twitched. "You do know what a friend is, right?"

"I doubt it," Kaltag gratingly chuckled rebelliously, even as he could barely stand on his own. His bloodshot eyes flicked to the Dark Lord. "He only has imaginary ones." Harry struggled not to snort as Voldemort's snout-like nostrils flared.

Mystikos gently shook the Celestial and commanded, "Be good, son. Your behavior is as appalling and uncouth as the rest of those filthy humans. You do not want to upset father's business partner, do you?"

The Being wriggled in the captive grasp and growled, "Well, forgive me, daddy!" Hryczuk roared in umbrage and swung his sword. Mystikos saw this and pulled Kaltag out of the blade's path, slicing the buttons of Kaltag's shirt instead.

"No!" Ella screamed. "Expelli—"

"NO!" Kaltag cried as the brunette vampire sped for the witch and leapt on her.

Harry spun around and aimed for Jojo. "Impediment—ARGH!" He yelled as Mona pounced and tackled him to the ground, his wand slipping out of his grasp.

Her leering face came into view and her lavender eyes twinkled with promise. "Ah, ah, ah! That was a wicked thing to do, little boy." Harry groaned as her knees dug into his thighs and her hands roamed over his chest and arms, her long teeth glistening in the moonlight.

He grimaced as he felt the sharp pain in his cheek from where her fangs had dragged his skin. "Perhaps ... I should ... punish you, yes?" Harry could feel her cool breath directly over the hot, throbbing pulse in his neck.

"No!" Voldemort and Kaltagonus objected simultaneously. Harry dared to raise his head a fraction to see what was going on, but Mona hissed and pushed it back in the dirt. "He's mine." Voldemort staunchly declared. "At least ... until I have what I want."

Mona's purple eyes flashed in annoyance and she snapped her teeth at Harry. "You got lucky this time, wizard." She proceeded to haul him to his feet, facing the Dark Lord.

"Whatever you want has nothing to do with Ella, so leave her and Harry alone!" Kaltag demanded of Voldemort, his strength finally coming back to him. The red-eyed wizard leered, black spittle sliding down his chin.

"I sought out at first to acquire the weapons of Areus Youngblood," he began before turning slowly to face Harry. "But now that Mr. Potter has graced us with his presence, I find it an ideal opportunity to learn what the prophecy entails."

Harry froze, his eyes locked on Voldemort's knowing ones. "Come, Boy-Who-Lived," he mockingly taunted. "Dumbledore would not be able to live with his wretched liver-spotted self upon realizing your knowledge of the prophecy's existence."

"Whatever it is, don't say anything, Harry!"

"Shut that boy up." Voldemort edgily hissed to Mystikos. Harry's eyes refused to cooperate to mask his awareness behind a façade of feigned ignorance. He felt Mona's arm around his neck tighten as Voldemort advanced, wand in hand.

"You have twenty seconds to tell me, Potter—and not that silly nonsense about the Child of Phoenix," he contemptuously snorted, and Harry could see a proud gleam in his eye before his wand arm snapped upward and was directed at Ella. "Or she dies." The Death Eaters and the Hybrids roared in approval.

"NO!" Harry's stomach roiled at Kaltag's horrified shout. Ella's eyes widened as Jojo strengthened her hold and she paled. Harry knew he had to tell Voldemort or Ella would die. The prophecy wasn't worth her life.

"Ten seconds, Potter." Voldemort smirked, his wand steady on the trembling Gryffindor. "Could you live with another death on your conscience? Or have you put young Mr. Diggory behind you already?"

A hollow sort of pain bloomed in Harry's chest and he sagged in Mona's grasp, defeated. "All right."

"What was that, Harry?"

"I said all right!" he snapped.

"Harry ... don't." He was surprised at Ella's hollow but stable voice. "I—I'm not worth it. Don't say anything, it's all right." Harry shook his head.

"No, no, I can't let you die, not like..." he swallowed at the sudden memory of Cedric Diggory lying spread eagled in the graveyard. "You're worth more than a stupid prophecy." He ignored the vampires' spiteful snorts.

Ella shook her head vehemently, even as fat tears began to roll down her cheeks. "Harry—"

"Time's up, Harry." Harry thrashed in the Lamia's strong clutch as Voldemort faced Ella. "Tsk, ts. Such a pity; you were a very lovely girl ... for a Gryffindor."

Even in the face of death, Ella scowled, defiant. "Rot in Hell, half-blood."

Harry had only ever seen Voldemort glare at one other person like that before ... him.

Kaltag threw himself against Mystikos' embrace roaring, "NOOO!"

"Avada Kedavr—UHH!"

Voldemort staggered as a large branch bowed down to sweep his legs out from under him. Harry immediately glanced at the Being, who gave him a questioning look, but whoever did it succeeded in knocking the curse off course. Harry—and Ella—breathed a sigh of relief.

"My, but you're a lucky one, Midnight Snack." Harry heard Jojo murmur to a revolted Ella in amusement.

Growling in a bestial fashion, Voldemort whipped his wand around and snarled a "Reducto!" at the offending branch, madly grunting with glee when it exploded into thousands of splinters. He whirled around to glare at Kaltagonus murderously, then Mystikos.

"I thought he was Compelled."

"He is."

"Apparently, he is not!" Voldemort snapped, baring his black teeth as he pointed to the disfigured tree. "Were he Compelled, he would not have been able to do that. Anton, either you control that boy—"

"Or you'll what? Try me, you bastard!" Kaltag barked at the Dark Lord. Harry fought Mona's grip as Mystikos roughly shook Kaltagonus.

"What have I told you about—"

"No." Voldemort signaled his Death Eaters to take no action, as well as Mystikos. The Dark Prince paused at the interruption, giving Voldemort a quizzical look. With a menacing grin, Voldemort surprisingly declared, "Release him."

Harry eyed the Dark Lord, flabbergasted. Even Mystikos looked suspicious, his brow wrinkled pensively as he obliged, letting go. Harry could tell Kaltagonus wanted to crumple to the ground but stood rebelliously on his own with a determined expression, despite his quiet and uneven breathing. The Being straightened his slumped posture as Voldemort advanced, his wand held tightly between his clawed hand and a smirk carved on unkind lips.

As the Dark Lord and the defiant Celestial were an arm's length apart, staring one another down, Voldemort dangerously whispered,

"You think you can defy me?" Kaltagonus merely expelled a sharp breath through his nose and pursed his lips tighter, eyes swirling with fury. "Hm," Came the sorcerer's response, a noise somewhere between a scoff and a mildly amused chuckle.

Harry watched Voldemort raise his wandless arm and backhand Kaltagonus' scowling face, hard. He never expected it to be so hard that Kaltagonus would fly across the miniature clearing, but that was exactly what happened. Ella screamed as Kaltag sailed through the air and landed headfirst into a large tree with a sickening crack. Harry made to go for him, but Mona muttered scolding words and held him back, practically squeezing the air from his lungs.

The Being cried out in pain, his form sliding to the ground and his head, which lurched from side to side, left a shiny, dark trail on the trunk. Harry knew it had to have been blood. As he raised a shaky hand to no doubt feel the predictable lump on the back of his head, Harry seethed when Voldemort loomed over the fallen Paraffin and grabbed the front of his ripped shirt in his fist, yanking him nose to nose.

"You see the power I have, and I can just as easily let that control slip. It would be wise of you to learn not to cross me, boy." His voice rose with every word. Kaltag's watery, unfocused eyes blinked slothfully up at the wizard. "Else the next time will be your last, whether I find out where the weapons are or not!" With a disgusted scoff, Voldemort pushed Kaltagonus roughly back to the ground, wiping at his nose with the sleeve of his robe. "You still have not learned: you reek of arrogance and condescension!"

"He is the heir of Zeus," Mona scorned, tittering. "Of course he is arrogant."

But as Harry watched Kaltagonus, it seemed the Being had not paid attention to a single word from the Dark Lord's admonishment. The Being feebly winced from his spot sprawled on the ground, nursing the wound on the back of his head with his hand. Harry gave him a sympathetic look as the Being's blue eyes rolled in his direction before the redhead inhaled sharply, pulling his head away from his hand. When his bloodied hand came into view, Harry couldn't help the gasp of surprise that escaped him.

His eyes were fixed on the shiny, moonlit mixture of red blood staining the Celestial's fingers. But what surprised him the most was the equal amount of gold liquid atop the red. Harry watched as Kaltag reached his other hand around his head and pulled it back, this time more gold on his fingers than red. The Being's eyes widened in alarm and he sat up, alert, blue eyes darting between both hands.

"No." Harry barely heard him object, but stared at the prefect shaking his head slowly in disbelief.

"Silence!" Voldemort barked, rounding on the Being.

Jojo snorted, tearing her eyes off of Ella's neck. "Ha! He's noble, all right. Even bleeds gold, that one."

Harry's gaze left the startled Celestial to gauge Voldemort's reaction; he wasn't disappointed. The wizard spun around, his expression annoyed and unmoved until his glowing eyes alighted on the glistening gold coating Kaltag's hands. Voldemort's scowl faded into astonishment and he uttered one, breathy word.

"Impossible."

Kaltagonus continued to shake his head in a haunted manner, his breathing irregular and sweat beginning to form on his brow. "God ... it's true. No, it can't ... I, no I ... it's true!" He whimpered, his entire body heaving from his shuddering breaths.

At last, Kaltag's bulging eyes shakily met Voldemort's, and that was when it all went spare.

Suddenly, Kaltag fell forward on his hands, his face pressed in the dirt as his body seized. "Kaltagonus!" Ella screamed, but Jojo didn't loosen her grasp. Harry watched Kaltag's fists beat at the dirt and his back muscles ripple beneath his shirt as if he were fighting something. A guttural cry erupted from the Being's lips and his fingers unfolded in his paroxysm, clawing at the earth.

It was then Harry noticed the wind whipping about the clearing, the trees groaning as they were nearly bent in half from the force. He felt more than saw the forest sway to Kaltag's will, power flocking to the Being in awesome waves. Dirtied fingers went from scrabbling at

the ground to fisting themselves in red hair, and Harry found himself very worried before Kaltag suddenly shot to his knees and commanded the gathering's full attention with his angry gaze. His eyes were chillingly white, and his face was contorted in a maddened look, his mouth twisted in a growl.

Harry had never been more afraid of someone else since Voldemort's return.

With an ear-splitting cry, the scowling Celestial reached for his neck, ripping the chain from around it, dangling reddish-black ball in hand. The wind strengthened into somewhat of a vortex, swirling around and weighing everyone down with Kaltag at the very center. Harry could barely keep his eyes open with the heavy blasts of air assaulting them from all sides, but he did see the scepter grow to its full size. It shrieked in Kaltag's grip as if it didn't want to be there, but couldn't imagine being anywhere else, all at the same time. The white-eyed Being then stretched his arms toward the full moon, his teeth bared in a beastly fashion.

"ALL POWER!" A deep, harsh voice so unlike the boy's belted from his mouth.

Without warning there was a flash of light and a ring of fire sprang up, trapping them all in a circle. Harry was suddenly freed from the Lamia's hold and fell to the ground. Confusion momentarily flared in his mind before he made to crawl for Ella, whose vampire had also abandoned her.

He vaguely wondered if it was the whirlpool's doing before he rolled himself out of the way as something erupted from the earth and shot into the air. The ground rumbled and shook beneath him, and Harry could sense its protests at being so roughly handled. He was startled when something thick and rough grabbed at his ankles and he kicked at it, scrambling away to collide with the brown-eyed witch.

"Harry!" He could barely hear her over the roar of the earth. He took hold of her arm and made to scuttle to safety, but suddenly felt the thick and rough object twist around his ankles again. Harry shouted, startled, and made to grab for Ella only to claw at empty space.

Before he could turn back to look for her, the roots that had seized him forcefully yanked him toward one of the enormous trees

sprouting from the ground. They slammed him against the trunk, wrapping thick rope-like coils of root around him securely; he barely had room to breathe, let alone move his arms.

Nevertheless, Harry struggled against his new captor, stopping only when he watched lightning and flame shatter the darkness and vicious wooden ropes also whip and spiral around the legs of the Death Eaters, Hybrids, vampires and to his surprise, Voldemort and Mystikos. Another large tree burst from the ground and the vines pinned a fidgety Ella to the trunk, firmly binding her and the others as well. Harry shook the hair out of his eyes as the wind violently picked up, and increased around the Being, who seemed to be reveling in the Ravenstone Scepter's power.

Quite abruptly, the wind dissipated into a gentle breeze, the fire and lightning withdrew and the Scepter's jarring screeches came to a halt. Harry watched with an uneasy feeling as Kaltagonus lowered his head, his back to the group of students and dark creatures tied to the circle of trees. Harry almost didn't want Kaltagonus to turn around because he knew he wouldn't like what he was about to see. He knew something was terribly wrong if even Voldemort couldn't break through the straps. He knew that the person with his back to them would in no way resemble the boy he knew was his brother. Harry gulped as Kaltagonus released a breathy chuckle.

"Kaltagonus?" Ella tentatively called. The boy's shoulders seemed to strengthen right before their very eyes as he squared them. "Kaltagonus, can you hear me?"

A tense silence pervaded the clearing as everyone waited with bated breath for a response. When they finally got it, Harry seriously wished for the silence to return instead.

"I'm sorry," a gruff, rich tone rumbled. "Kaltagonus isn't available right now." Harry felt a chill run down his spine as the redheaded figure turned to face them with a sinister smirk.

Golden eyes danced with malicious mirth as they settled on the captive audience. "And don't bother leaving a message, I assure you," his sinister eyes raked over the quivering witch. "Kaltagonus Smythe is never coming back."

oooooooooooo



A/N: Yes! Golradir's here! FINALLY! (You can tell I'm excited about him, can't you?) Review!

A/N 2: Everbero means to strike violently in Latin. I've just been pulling out the Latin dictionary for every chapter, haven't I:) And Kratisto means 'to the strongest' in Greek. That was Alexander the Great's last word, y'all...

## Chapter Thirty-Five: Voldemort's Greatest Mistake (aka, Id)

The golden-eyed Golradir chuckled, twirling the fiery-orbed Scepter between his fingers as he glided to the center of the clearing. There was a feline grace in his movements that his alter ego Kaltagonus never possessed. As Harry shifted against his bindings, he noticed the rest of the captives.

The Death Eaters had lost their masks somewhere in the maelstrom and he recognized the Lestrangle brothers, jittery Rabastan and thickset, scowling Rodolphus. Harry vaguely remembered they were supposed to be in Azkaban, but didn't remember hearing of a recent breakout. The third gaunt and sallow-skinned follower was unknown to him.

Beside them, the vampires were snarling and wriggling furiously, biting at their ropes, as were the Hybrids, even as the red-haired Being chuckled disparagingly. Ella shot Harry a worried, fearful look, glancing at Golradir with something akin to horror. Voldemort, predictably, was murderous; Mystikos simply looked curious.

Harry froze as Golradir aimed the glowing Ravenstone Scepter at him with a crooked smirk, his clawed hand moving it just a fraction as a white beam fired past his head, ruffling his hair as it rocketed off into the darkness. "I am expecting a few guests," the sinister Being explained cordially. Harry couldn't help but notice the deep pitch with which he spoke, so unlike the fiery-tempered Being. "But I will go on despite their absence. After all: no sense in spoiling the party when we have more than enough guests, yes?" He widely grinned, displaying his somewhat narrowed teeth, reshaped into points.

"Unhand me." Voldemort coldly commanded, his eyes narrowed and swirling with fury.

Golradir theatrically gasped. "And let you miss all the fun? That would be terribly rude of me as the host." He replied mock horrified and smirked in the seething Dark Lord's direction. "However, it is awfully foul of me to have you here and not introduce myself. But first I—"

Suddenly, there was a loud snapping sound and a growl and before Harry knew it, Jojo had broken through the bindings and grabbed Golradir by the neck, knocking the Scepter out of his hand. "Dead

meat's what yeh are," she hissed, her tongue running up and down his neck. "But not before I have a taste o' your royal blood, m'sweet boy."

Harry was seriously unnerved when Golradir's response was to smile: there was something about his smile that was off, demented almost.

Golden eyes twinkled merrily and were so disturbingly narrowed, there were only pinpricks of black visible. "What are you waiting for?" He urged. "Be the first bloodsucker to taste gold blood and run off to your little neck-nibbling mates to brag about it." Harry felt icy dread grip him as Jojo sniffed and lapped at the madly grinning boy's neck.

"Go on," Golradir repeated. "Bite me."

Jojo replied with a snicker, flashing her fangs, "If you insist." She proudly hissed before her fangs disappeared into the redhead's neck, her jaws clamping down. Harry watched, gaping as Golradir gasped, his eyes fluttering shut and a euphoric smile stretched across his face. From across the glade, Harry could hear Mona's triumphant chuckles.

Jojo pulled back to drink the red and gold blood spilling down Kaltag's neck with a delighted smirk. "Oh," she moaned as she greedily slurped. "Oh, Mona, you've got to taste him! So sweet, it's so sweet!" She licked noisily, her gray eyes dilating and slowly draining into scarlet. "I knew he'd be good, so delicious!" the vampire wiped the dripping gold from her mouth with the back of her sleeve, a manic gleam in her eyes. "We've got to save this one, Mona! He's so sweet! He's..." Jojo abruptly stopped, her wide beam disappearing completely from her face.

The next thing Harry knew the dark creature belted out a bloodcurdling scream, gripping her head between her fists and shaking it violently. She hunched over and shook herself, banging at her head with a balled fist and ripping out tufts of chestnut brown and ran, as if trying to escape something, something possibly haunting her, something in her head.

Before his very eyes, Jojo's unblemished olive skin, rotted; gold blood slopped from her mouth full of decayed teeth and over her

cracked lips spilling down her front. Her vibrant hair was now a ball of flame and the scent of the burnt green, slimy skin of her hands filled the air. Harry swallowed the urge to vomit as gold liquid poured from her worm-eaten nose and eye sockets, flying in all directions as she furiously began to shake her head. The once beautiful Jojo was now a decomposing corpse, loping around the clearing on mismatched legs of brass and donkey, an inhuman wail passing her lips.

And while all this happened, Golradir whistled a cheerful tune as he crossed over to Hryczuk and smoothly unsheathed his sword. He looked on, bored, as the Empousa ran by him, howling in anguish as vessels all over her body burst, pouring black and gold blood.

"Silly me: Did I forget to tell you?" He offhandedly began as he polished the sword with the vampire's discarded shirt. Golradir paused to smirk, spearing the suffering creature with a dark look.

"I'm O-poisonous."

As she passed, he swung the blade and her shrieking abruptly stopped, echoing sharply through the forest. Jojo's head made a graceful arc in the air before hitting the ground, rolling to a stop near Harry's feet. Harry's stomach renewed the urge to heave, but he stopped it: just barely.

"Well!" Golradir happily replied, tossing the sword off to the side and cracking his back. "That certainly stung. Been a while: glad to see I haven't lost my old charm." He grabbed a piece of Jojo's shirt and wiped the fluid from the dual punctures in his neck, chucking the soiled cloth at Mona (who shrank away) and tucking the Ravenstone Scepter in his waistband. Golradir paused at the rest of the Empousa's body, threw it an impatient look, and proceeded to kick it, rolling into a nearby ditch.

He loudly sighed, satisfied, before he turned to face the rest of the clearing. "Oh! Hello! Forgot you were all here. Nice of you to wait for me."

"Like we had a choice." Rodolphus Lestrangle bitterly seethed, squirming beneath the roots' grip.

"Manners, young man," Golradir crooned. "Oh, I forget: you are, after all, humans." He distastefully replied.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters hissed in protest. "How dare you refer to us as Muggles!" the third Death Eater snarled.

"No," the narrow-eyed Being dangerously whispered as he stared them down. "You're just humans with magic sticks.

"Now, then," he clapped his hands together and smiled winningly, smiled as if he hadn't just killed someone, even if it was a vampire. Harry fought desperately against his restraints: this couldn't be happening!

"Before we commence: any more takers? I promise you your death will be just as quick as hers." The only sound in the clearing was of heavy breathing and gasps. "None? You're not as stupid as you all look, then. Now, first thing's first."

Golradir's sneer gave way to a scowl as he strode up to the livid Dark Lord ... and whacked him clear across the cheek. Voldemort's head flew to the side and black spit foamed out of his mouth when he gave the boy a death glare.

"Now, now," Golradir jovially continued, leaning over the dark wizard and grasping his chin between his fingers. He shook the scowling wizard's head from side to side comically with each word. "Let's keep our hands to ourselves, shall we?" Harry would have laughed, especially at the deadly look Voldemort was giving the redhead, had the situation not been so terrifying.

"How dare you treat our lord with such contempt!" Rodolphus shouted, thrashing beneath the fastened roots. Harry could see the Lestrangle brothers had their wands in hand.

"Oh, I wouldn't bother. I've blocked your magic." Golradir casually replied, leaning away from the growling Voldemort. "It's mine to control, now." Harry froze, his eyes wide as saucers.

"Impossible!" Rabastan balked.

Golradir's eyebrow arched. "Do you feel anything?" Harry decided against his better judgment to see for himself as Rodolphus shouted

various Unforgivables. He whispered the Light Spell under his breath—his wand was just a few feet away—but nothing happened. In fact, Harry felt quite ... empty. He had always felt some sort of unexplainable sensation all over his body, and somehow he knew that was his magic. Now, all he could feel was a nagging tingle throughout his body, but it was deadened enough to ignore. A quick look to Ella a tree down from him confirmed she felt it, too.

"Well?"

At the Lestranges' horror-struck expressions, Golradir dispassionately stated, "I rest my case.

"Now, you will listen up, and you will listen well. I will not repeat myself, so do not interrupt me or else," he paused from his pacing to scowl at each of them in turn. Harry shivered when those sinister eyes fell on him. "I'll have to get nasty, and I don't want to get nasty ... yet." Golden eyes shifted to the next person to appraise. "The consequence, should you refuse to comply..."

In a split second, the niggling prickle Harry felt became unbearable as unimaginable pain exploded through his body. Wherever he felt his skin crawling, there was hot pain, and his head felt as if it was cleaved in half and stuck in a pot of boiling oil, much worse than when his scar hurt. His body jerked and writhed against the ropes and Harry knew he was just one in the chorus of screaming voices he could hear throughout the glade. In what seemed like minutes but was in reality seconds, the blistering pain rivaling the Cruciatus was back to an uncomfortable prickle, heat rising to the surface of his skin.

"That, ladies, was your magic." Golradir gleefully enlightened. "More specifically, the magic in your blood. You see, you've got me under your skin: literally. If I'm in you, then I'm in your magic; if I'm in your magic, I'm in your blood." He calmly smiled as he walked. "And if I'm in your blood, I can get to your mind. And when I'm in your mind, I've got your soul," he stopped dead in front of Voldemort. "And if I've got your soul? I am you. And if I'm you ...

"...You're doomed." Harry heard the chilling whisper resonate in his head. An icy grip seized his insides before it vanished. "But enough of that. Now that you know the rules, are we clear?" His response

was met with the groans of those still twitching from the pain. Harry gulped when Golradir's eyes reflected annoyance.

"I said, are—we—clear?" The searing pain returned and Harry felt as if his very veins were coursing with liquid fire.

"YES! YESSSS!" The prisoners cried out, quaking between the roots and the tree trunks. The golden-eyed beast let out a breathy chuckle.

"Shall we begin?" He sociably replied to their drawn expressions. "I am so very pleased you all could be here to witness this." Golradir paused to close his eyes and sigh, almost happily, before the demented twinkle returned to his gaze. "I'm sorry; I have to pause and revel in the fact that I have made it. I'm here."

He slowly began to strut about the clearing. "Seventeen years at war, and with whom? A brilliant fool more powerful than he realizes, keeping me dormant for all these years? Inconceivable!" The scowling stranger paused to casually lean on Voldemort's tree again. "Frighteningly powerful, this one, and yet incredibly foolish. 1After all, what good is power if you don't know how to harness it? Right, Voldemort?" Harry could feel Voldemort's rage pulsing in his scar, nearly blinding him in pain; angry couldn't even begin to describe the Dark Lord.

"But I'll get to you later," Golradir mirthlessly chuckled as he chuckled the red-eyed sorcerer's chin with a finger. Something told Harry that there was more than just conviction in the Being's tone. "For those of you unfamiliar with this body, allow me to introduce my witless host: Kaltagonus ... Lucien ... Kataibates ... Smythe, the Child of Phoenix." He haltingly announced.

From his right, Ella gasped in disbelief. "You're ... you're supposed to be—you're supposed to be—"

"I wha...? Wha, huh, wha?" Golradir mocked as he glided in her direction. He leaned in close and gave the witch a charming smile. "Say again, my little morsel?"

Ella's face scrunched up and she replied, "You—you're supposed to be good! You're supposed to be—"

"All I am supposed to be, sweet girl," the gold-eyed Being interrupted, his lips hovering near the red-haired witch's ear, "Is the last face you see before you die. I am to put you and the rest of your frail-minded race out of their misery until my task is complete. I would have done this already, but Kaltagonus," he spat the Celestial's name as if it were a curse, and Harry saw the witch flinch at his harsh tone, "had not yet yielded to me and given me reign over his body so I can use it for my discretion. Now, why can't that silly little boy just do as he's told for once?"

"Silly, though he may be," Golradir pulled away from Ella's decidedly pink face, "but extraordinary: a strong, beautiful," his hand moved to brush against her cheek. Harry could tell Ella was barely containing her shudder of fear. "Deadly individual. Gods and goddesses of all ages swoon for him, but he's as naïve as they come. Incredibly, I had met my match ... in a human. A cursed one, at that." Golradir simpered, curling his stroking fingers into a fist and lowering it. He moved away from Ella and Harry saw her quiet sigh of relief.

"But no more. I intend to remain in control; he's had his entertainment, but his body now belongs to me. Anyone who disagrees," he motioned to the discarded blade, "will debate their rebuttal with that sword.

"Where to start, where to start," the golden-eyed Being paced, his hands settled on his bare waist as his shirt billowed in the soft breeze. He paused in front of Voldemort with a brightening expression. "Ah! Voldemort?" Golradir motioned to himself as the red-eyed sorcerer scowled. "Meet your greatest mistake: me."

Voldemort's expression was inscrutable, but Golradir continued anyway. "Oh, how soon you forget. Come on, let's jog that memory. Think back, some eighteen years ago. Nighttime ... tavern ... me nearly choking the life out of you before I even left the womb? Any of this ringing a bell?"

If Voldemort was surprised, he hid it well. His face remained a calm, frightening mask of indifference, but when he spoke, his voice was low and rasping. "I destroyed you."

The golden-eyed Being sneered, "No. You displaced me. Disregarded me as a botched job." His lip stuck out in a disdainful pout. "I resent that, really."



Harry's scar gave a sharp twinge as Voldemort's crimson gaze briefly flicked in his direction. "What do you want?"

"We can offer you plenty of blood if you are so inclined," Mystikos added, looking upon the ginger-haired beast in something akin to wonder. "The three of us together would be a force no one would dare oppose. Join our side, the right side."

Golradir snorted in the Dark Prince's direction. "It's not blood I want. I may have been out of commission for centuries but that doesn't mean I've forgotten how to kill." He inclined his head toward the ditch where Jojo's body lay.

"Then release us and I give you my word you can slaughter as many as you want. You do not want to displease me." Voldemort threatened, squaring his shoulders even beneath the thick, secure straps.

"You say that as if your word means something to me." The Celestial quietly replied as he steadily held the Dark Lord's gaze and moved away. "Promises are for those with something to lose. You are a great manipulator, Serpent Tongue, but not nearly good enough." The affronted look on Voldemort's face spoke volumes.

Harry fought the urge to recoil when the Celestial abruptly stopped before him and smirked. "You really are as dense as the dark-eyed one says, Potter. Dreams that were not your own, precious gems that glowed when I was in proximity, mood swings. As my disinclined host would say, you're a regular bloodhound, aren't you?" He grinned his feral grin as Harry inwardly seethed. Mystikos openly chuckled as Golradir continued his stride.

"But yes, Potter, your precocious little witch friend was right: I am a Bellotaur, and as nasty as they come. The last of its kind, a gesture made certain by yours truly ... nearly 4000 years ago when I came to be, but one can never be too confident in his work. But I promise I'll get to you later, Voldemort." His eyes gleamed and his teeth seemed to become sharper as his mouth stretched into a sarcastic grin. The sharp pang in Harry's scar meant Voldemort was boiling beneath the surface at such offense.

"4000 years ... that was ages ago. An age where power was seized without compromise, where humans feared us — the very same white-knuckled fear gripping you now; an age when Celestials," he mockingly spat, "were still called gods. The gods had their attention turned to the war, which left me free to devastate the homes of the soldiers. There would be no Greece by the time the Great War would be over with, not if I could help it. It was a golden age, an era that rivaled even the magnificence of the Great Kingdoms of the Hellas," Harry swallowed as the fanatical expression on the Bellotaur's face fell flat into a scowl. Bright eyes drifted over the forest floor, vaguely unseeing as Golradir paused to visibly hark back to times' passed. His eyes glistened with bitterness. "Kingdoms I could have taken, had I not been imprisoned in that stupid Seer's ball.

"They thought they could control me." Golradir nodded to himself; Harry noticed he was too far-gone to realize he was rambling. "Lock me away in some ridiculous orb to keep me out of trouble. You fools. No orb — nor any council can bind me, the greatest warrior never mentioned! No man can control me!"

An obsessive laughter bubbled up from his throat and Harry was alarmed to realize he'd only ever heard Voldemort laugh in that same way. And apparently, the red-eyed sorcerer wasn't too keen on being out-chuckled. He threw the Being a look of utmost loathing, which, naturally, continued to go unnoticed.

"They thought the punishment of locking me away in an orb for all eternity was condign enough. They never once thought rebuking me to solitary confinement would force me to think," Golradir paused to stare at Mona and furiously rap his finger to her temple, "of other means of escape. Those fools allowed me to plot my revenge: my flight. Oh, they should have been more careful: they left me to think over all the pain and anguish and sorrow I caused." Golradir scorned.

"Oh, I thought, all right. I thought of how to fill that ache in me, that sharp panging that longed for the thrill of the kill, the sound of my sword, so sharp, that it whistled through the air when I wielded it. I thought of all of these things: and I thought of ways to escape. Of signals, signs to get your weak lot to notice me, to free me. But I had to wait for the opportune moment, waiting long-sufferingly in my little

white orb, waiting to be reborn into a new world, fresh for the slaughter.

"Now it's true I could have taken control of a man, but my urges would have made me seek out a stronger one and another and another; the deaths were sure to gain attention, attention I did not need at the moment. And thus, my brilliant plan," Golradir smirked chillingly, leaving Harry feeling ice-cold and anxious. "I could not take hold of a man, but I could of a woman. The drawback: I would be born a fetus, with little to no control over her depending on her magical ability, but nonetheless, I would be formed with only the capacity to influence the mare to protect her fetus by any means necessary.

"Thankfully, your lot was exceptionally ignorant of the warning on the Unfathomable. It was by pure chance I slipped through her fingers; and then, I was made. My plan was perfect," his triumphant grin dissolved into a frown. "Until you came along and screwed it to the high heavens." He aimed at the snarling Dark Lord, the trees crackling from his annoyance. "Nevertheless, you fell for it. You really are a stupid race."

"You like hearing yourself talk, don't you?"

All eyes glided over to the foolish soul that spoke these words. Harry's eyes immediately darted to Golradir, who instead of attacking as he assumed, gave Rodolphus a tiny smile. Slowly, Golradir moved across the clearing to the tree holding the frowning Death Eater, Rodolphus' fist still tight around his useless wand. He slowly nodded. "Indeed. And you're like me, aren't you?"

Rodolphus cringed as the soft-spoken Bellotaur leaned in to sniff at the blood caked in his dark wispy beard and tangled hair. Harry craned his neck to watch Golradir's nose graze the dark wizard's whiskers and the golden eyes fall shut as they inhaled deeply. A smile unfolded across the ginger-haired Being's face.

"Mm..." he all but purred as his hands slid up the Death Eater's robes to grip them tightly. "More than one scent pervades yours. You have..." Golradir paused to make a quivering gasp as he breathed in the pleased Lestranger's arms down to his hands. "The lives of others saturate your very being! I bet you've killed dozens, haven't you? You're just like me." Harry felt a sudden chill at the

Bellotaur's bizarre behavior. Golradir tilted his head to the side and cracked the eager, agreeing Death Eater a sweet smile.

In a split second Golradir's pleasant grin shifted into a nasty sneer as a root exploded from the soil, whipping Hryczuk's sword from the ground and into Golradir's outstretched hand.

Rodolphus had just enough time to convey his shock as Golradir's golden eyes blazed deadly, pulsing scarlet and he gruffly snarled, "I don't like competition."

The blade glinted briefly in the moonlight before it fell on Rodolphus, rending his head from his shoulders. Gasps and cries of horror and protest rang throughout the group as the roots loosened around the fallen Death Eater's body, dropping it to the forest floor with a listless 'thud'.

Harry's wide eyes moved from the thickset wizard's remains to the growling Bellotaur. Golradir wiped the dark smear—obviously Rodolphus' blood—from his face with his sleeve. Harry felt his stomach turn when Golradir licked a drop of blood from the corner of his mouth and his once again gold eyes winked at the ashen Rabastan. Though he never did care much about the Lestranges, Harry would never have wished that kind of death on anyone.

He came back to the present when Golradir once again tossed the sword aside and mopped the line of blood off his chest with the corner of his shirt. "I do hate being interrupted," he casually mentioned as if he were commenting on the weather. He gave the still corpse of Rodolphus a disapproving look as he wiped his torso. "Nevertheless, our headless friend is correct: enough about me," Golradir's golden eyes flashed menacingly and another chilling smile made its way to his face. "Let's hear about you. After all, it's not everyday I get to play with my toys before I break them. So who's first?"

The light rustling of leaves by the wind answered his inquiry. No one dared to speak, and Harry thought it was because they either feared that nastily unpleasant feeling of their blood set afire or losing their head. He shivered at the mere thought of either of those.

Golradir's expectant expression turned foul. "I've waited thousands of years for this moment." He softly admitted, his voice building with

intensity. "Been waiting for this since I was stuck, jailed in that orb. Waiting since incubation in my host-witch, waiting for the moment until I drew breath again, until I had strength to wield my sword once more! Too long have I been without the feel of warm, cleansing, telling blood; I yearn for the taste of copper on my tongue! Now again ... who shall be first?"

The harsh-faced Being pulled the Ravenstone Scepter from his waistband and held it aloft, threateningly. "Is it you?" He pointed toward one of the Hybrids. "You, Potter? Or you? Hm?" He asked, stepping lightly, like a predator stalking its prey. "Consider it an honor, for you would be recorded as the first soul taken upon Golradir's second uprising. Who," Harry flinched as the Bellotaur roared, "shall be first?"

Not one sound was made by the mixed assembly. Golradir straightened his hunched poise and narrowed his eyes at them. "No volunteers? Very well."

The sharp whistle of wind cutting through air was all the warning they received before an incisive invisible force swept through the bedraggled group. Harry gasped aloud as the wind nipped by, and his head snapped to the side as he felt the distinct sensation of blood trickling down onto his face from a sizeable laceration on his forehead.

Golradir moaned from his center spot in the clearing. A quick glance at the remaining Death Eaters and Voldemort showed that they'd been nicked, too. "So many familiar scents, so enticing!" The Bellotaur shut his eyes and pressed fingertips to his temple. "My Mind's Eye Sees so much pain amongst this group. Betrayal, lies, deceit, sacrifice, prophecy, stupidity; death, murder, anguish ... riveting. All the more reason to do you in, save you from this wretched, wretched world." He paused, his gleaming eyes darting from the canopy to the forest floor as his nostrils flared, "But first: come out, come out, sword-bearer!"

Within moments more roots sprang from the earth but dashed into the darkness of the trees this time. Seconds later, the long coils returned, dragging a bulky, resisting mass along. With the same brutality shown himself and the others, Harry watched as the ropes lashed the captive forward and flung them back with a sickening 'crack' against the only vacant tree, finally wrapping themselves

tightly around them. The new prisoner groaned, their head lolling forward.

"Professor Kenward," Golradir dourly greeted. Harry could see beneath the dead leaves clinging to his woolly robes and the dirt on his face that it was indeed Kenward. "Been waiting for you all day."

Without skipping a beat Kenward quickly answered, "Well, I got here as fast as I could."

"Witty one, eh?" Golradir sneered and mimed cuffing the professor across the face. Kenward harshly inhaled and clenched his fists as a gash suddenly appeared on his cheek. "There. More where that came from, I promise. Oh, and before I forget..." The Bellotaur extended his hand and Harry watched as Kenward, whose hands were balled into such tight fists they were sweating, exhaled in defeat as his hand snapped open and a yellow beam shot into Golradir's hand. Harry could see the amber glow of Amenophus dimming in the dark Celestial's palm. With a satisfied smirk, Golradir closed his fist around the gem.

"Now: where to begin? You all smell so fascinating, I find myself hard-pressed to choose. Then again," Golradir's eyes glittered wickedly in the moonlight as his gaze landed on Harry. The Gryffindor swallowed.

Golradir was on him in a minute, punting the head of Jojo Six into the thick of trees and sniffing at the stinging wound across Harry's forehead. "Let us begin with Pitiful Potter, the berk-who-lived." Harry abandoned his caution in favor of scowling at the Bellotaur. "Although, you can't be held entirely responsible for that; I can't blame you solely for the supreme botch-up. That honor goes to you, Voldemort," the ginger-haired Bellotaur sent a pointed glance at the Dark Lord. "After all, what moron can't kill a toddler? Ah, that's right: you can't."

The pasty-faced sorcerer growled in umbrage, struggling so fiercely against his bindings that a few roots snapped. But Golradir settled his hands on either side of Harry's head, sighing as Voldemort snarled in a bestial manner. He blinked his golden eyes and shook his head lightly, amused. "You'll just have wait your turn, O Fearsome One. I'm doing Potter, first."

Eyes swimming with spite and wickedness speared his own green eyes in place. A feral smirk slowly unfolded across his face and Harry could hear the faintest of snuffles coming from the Bellotaur, the killer leaning but an inch from his face. "So, Potter," he casually began. Harry warily eyed the hand that inched ever closer to him and mentally braced himself for the strike. It never came. Instead, Golradir chuckled knowingly and fingered a pitch-black lock of his hair, almost affectionately.

Harry was more nervous than ever before as he studied the Being right in front of him. He was so close, Kaltagonus was right there: it was his face lined with malice and cruelty; it was his gentle hand playing with Harry's messy mop of hair; it was his lips smirking that demented smirk and chuckling menacingly at Harry's discomfort; it was his chest rising and falling from the air in his lungs through his narrow, very Lily-like nose. It was Kaltagonus; everything physical about this person screamed Kaltagonus Smythe back at him.

But he wasn't. God, he wasn't. Harry saw harsh lines in Kaltag's handsome face that weren't there before tonight; he saw slightly pointed teeth every time his mouth moved, that weren't present all year; he saw Rodolphus Lestrangle's blood smeared down the side of Kaltag's face and clothes. And worst of all, those brilliant blue eyes that conveyed so much: intellect, cleverness, carefully concealed pain ... were replaced by the ever-glowing harshness of gold malice.

None of it was Kaltagonus, and Harry feared that it never would be, again.

"Ah, that modicum of intelligence you possess is bubbling through your blood, I ... I can smell it. I barely have to put in much effort; your blood just screams everything you don't want me to know." Eyelids flapped shut, shielding the intense golden eyes from view. Harry shied away, wary as Golradir pressed Kaltag's nose to Harry's head wound. A deep, shuddering inhale set the Bellotaur's chest vibrating against Harry's. "You've had a difficult childhood: bitterness dots your blood. Neglect," he sniffed, "envy from your relatives," Harry's eyes widened at that. "Let's have a closer reading, shall we?"

Harry gave a startled yell as Golradir's finger traced his scar, scratching deep enough to bring blood to the surface. He struggled

against the roots' ties, but they quivered and tightened at Golradir's raised brow. "Mm, you're a serpent speaker. Intelligence? Questionable, at best. And fear, you have lots of fear," Harry glared through his eyelashes at Golradir's pensive tone. "But not of me, young wizard. Oh yes, you have a fear, dear boy, that not even you are aware of. But your blood: why, it's a storybook.

"You fear loss," the Bellotaur resumed, his quiet breath moistening Harry's temple. "More loss, to be precise. First your parents," Harry tensed at their mention, "then your innocence at the hands of your family ... useless lot, humans. Now you fear the future: of losing, missing your mark, failing so terribly in the capricious eyes of your adoring public, a public you don't even like."

Harry forced himself not to tremble when Golradir carded his fingers through his hair in a fatherly fashion. He had to remind himself over and over that it wasn't Kaltagonus, no matter how much the voice and mannerisms resembled the Being. "You fear you will be the destruction of the wizard world. But ... why?" Harry's breath hitched as Golradir threw him a questioning glance before those gentle hands tensed into claws and painfully wrenched Harry's head to his nose where he took a deep, expanding breath.

"Ohh, Potter." He quietly intoned in a singsong fashion. Harry wished he could see the beast's face, but his sight was full of a pale expanse of neck. Golradir briefly lowered his gaze to Harry's, his eyes dancing as his mouth breathed cold dread into Harry's ear.

"I know your little secret ... Prophecy-Protected," the last words echoed in his mind.

Harry's eyes widened. "Can you—?"

"Kill you? Yes, yes I can," Golradir brightly replied, much to Harry's alarm. "However, it would be unwise to tempt the Fates after this second chance." Harry couldn't hold back his relieved sigh. "But that doesn't mean I can't make you hurt a little."

Green eyes widened in shock just before white-hot pain lanced through the Gryffindor's body. His vision swam before his eyes as he felt his body coursing liquid fire and his head felt as if someone were pounding it with an incredibly heavy mallet. The twine around



him seemed to cut tighter into his body as he thrashed about, vaguely aware of the screams echoing throughout the clearing.

"Stop it! STOP IT!" the shrill plea boomed in Harry's ears. Quite suddenly, the pain eased from his body leaving a dull, niggling ache. Harry sagged into the ropes and shivered, trying to wrap his mind around what was going on. His shakily turned to the tree on his right where Kenward stared at him in shock and concern.

But it was Ella's screams for mercy that registered in Harry's mind, stopping the Bellotaur from making Harry officially insane. Harry made a mental note to thank her if they ever survived this. But now, Harry could only stand by and watch helplessly as Golradir zeroed in on Ella. Harry watched her shiver as Golradir graced her with his impenitent grin. "You only get one free pass, darling. And that was it." Harry sighed in relief as Golradir turned away from her. When Ella glanced at him, he shakily smiled in thanks.

"And where to begin with you?" Golradir unpleasantly stated to Kenward. "There's nothing remotely remarkable about you. Just a meek, shabby little traveler carrying around his great-granddaddy's science project as if he were Atlas with the world on his shoulders." The Bellotaur paused to eye the brightly gleaming jewel sitting on his palm. "I guess I should — albeit grudgingly — thank you for keeping the sword for me. Saved me a hell of a lot of time from going after it myself." Harry noted the hungry glimmer in the Dark Lord's eyes at seeing both of Youngblood's weapons right before his eyes.

Kenward narrowed his eyes. "Don't mention it."

Golradir scoffed, backing away from Kenward's death glare to edge over to the equally peeved Dark Lord. "Ah, see here: the man who let the boy live." He sardonically greeted, chuckling as the Dark Lord-creature growled in caution. "Though I could be wrong about the man part; your scent tells me you are less man than you appear."

"Release me." Voldemort seriously demanded.

"No, that wouldn't work," Golradir dismissively waved. "You'd probably throw promises at me until I came around and then you'd probably try to kill me the first chance you get, or get your partner-in-

crime here," he said with a nod to the riveted Mystikos, "to do it for you. Or, I seem to recall you saying something earlier about disgracing me? Breaking me?" The ginger-haired Being acidly sniggered. "Sucks when the tables have turned, doesn't it? I am no fool, Lord Voldemort; do not take me for one."

The Bellotaur's staid expression twitched as he leaned forward to nose at the long black slash across Voldemort's cheek. "The very air around you is ... ripe with evil. The quintessence of malevolence," Harry didn't know if Voldemort was pleased with the compliment or livid. "Yet, your blood is colored with arrogance and foolhardiness." Golradir shifted quickly as the dark wizard lunged to strike. "Case in point."

Golradir's questing fingers toyed with the collar of Voldemort's robes. "I'd heard of you, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," the creature mockingly whispered. "I have turned an ear to your wicked excursions while I sat confined to my orb. Yes, I remember. I remember everything. The whispers of this great power, the terror you single-handedly inflicted upon the world of magic. Intriguing. Very intriguing; but not impressive." Voldemort's crimson eyes glittered with hatred. "I know all about you. It's because of you that I'm here now and not eighteen years ago. I knew it was you. You think I didn't, but I did." Golradir solemnly nodded as he ran his fingers down the crease of Voldemort's cloak. "And I'm not very happy, Voldemort.

"You set back my rebirth and recapture. I would've had control over the stupid boy by now if you hadn't come after the witch so hastily. Instead, because of you, Mr. Wizard of Terror, I was moved into a womb of resilience, a child already formed for the taking. But he would not have my voice inside his head. Only when he recedes to breaking point would he need me, want me ... and have me—or I, him, and he would have no choice but to surrender to my will. It took a tremendous amount of unnecessary toil to reprogram the child, breaking my power over him, leaving me weak, in the far recesses of one's mind that no one dare speak about. For that ... I am extremely displeased with you."

The Being's eyebrows lowered dangerously over his goldenrod eyes as his hand twisted in the Dark Lord's robes. "I waited nearly two decades for my chance to come again. And you almost ruined it

again tonight. I long to kill you where you stand, pinned beneath my wisp of mercy."

The Bellotaur leered in the face of Voldemort's glower, thumbing a line of blood and bring it to his nose. Harry's brow furrowed as the golden-eyed Being paused, his face bemused as he sniffed again. When his eyes flicked to Harry, the Gryffindor felt a growing sense of apprehension as those wicked eyes flashed red for a moment.

"You're shitting me," the Bellotaur tonelessly replied, scowling. "You're lucky your pathetic excuse for a life is guarded by Prophecy." A bully for Voldemort, Harry humorously mused. He never thought he'd see the day. However, Voldemort grinned triumphantly at the divulgence, silently daring the Bellotaur to cross him again. "This is turning out to be very disappointing night. I'm supposed to kill everyone I come in contact with."

A second later Golradir pounced forward at Mona, but hovered an inch before her with a manic grin plastered on his face. "Of course, that is my choice."

"Who are you to decide who gets to live and who dies?"

"Silence, Professor. You've had your turn." Golradir dismissed as he strode over Rodolphus' body to Kenward's right and a smile broke over his face. "Now, it's Weeping Beauty's turn."

The Bellotaur's stroked his knuckles over the redheaded witch's cheek slowly and reverently, the glow of Amenophus lighting up her cautious face and gleaming in her brown eyes. "I couldn't mar such beauty; that would be barbaric." Harry watched intently as the roots slithered from around Ella and released her arm, which Golradir immediately grabbed upon its liberation. A sudden draft circled the clearing and Ella gasped. Harry noticed a fresh stripe on her forearm bleeding freely.

Before she had a chance to pull her arm free Golradir's nose was sliding down the pale skin of her arm, his eyes locked on hers. "Ha. How poetic: you are prophecy. And might I say, your blood smells as sweet as you, my tender morsel." Harry's respect for the witch grew ten times when he saw her give the Being a withering look.

When Ella tried to yank her arm back he warningly advised, "Ah! I could just as easily slice your neck, darling. Hold still: I don't bite."

"As if I believe you."

Golradir clutched her arm delicately, his eyes fixedly studying the shiny blood. "That stings, really." His eyes fell closed as he breathed in whatever scent he caught on to. "Interesting. You're an Oracle, a Seer..." he sniffed again. "Apollo-blessed."

Something stirred in Harry at Golradir's words. It wasn't his scar, even though Voldemort listened attentively and narrowed his eyes when Golradir mentioned Ella was an Oracle. He'd already known that from the prophecy back a few months ago. No, there was something definitely off in his opinion, and he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Blessed by Apollo," Golradir continued, blood smearing on his nose and chin from smelling so extensively, "before birth? Peculiar. Your parents must have done something exceptionally admirable to be in Apollo's favor. My," he airily chuckled. "Not even out of the womb and already you are Blessed, and a tandem-gift, too. Impressive, little morsel." The revolted look on Ella's face for some reason reminded Harry strongly of Mrs. Weasley when Fred and George's pranks usually. . . .

Harry's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Wait a tick ...

"And, my, you're keeping a monster of a secret, aren't you?" The Bellotaur replied, snickering. "All this time, and you haven't even told him yet? Naughty little flower, aren't you?"

When Ella's gaze met Harry's across the distance, Harry knew his suspicions were right. "Oh my God..." he faintly moaned, visibly stunned. Ella's eyes widened and suddenly she knew that he knew, and she gave him a hard look and dimly shook her head. A strangled noise sounded and Harry vaguely realized it had come from him. "Oh my God. . . ."

"Not as dumb as he looks, that one." Golradir chortled, holding Ella's arm as if it were a frail object that needed full attention.

Harry unexpectedly felt sick to his stomach. She had known all this time and never said a word? She had known that she shared the same Weasley-red hair, laidback casualness and the same legendary Weasley temper and hadn't said one word? "You really had it in for babies, didn't you?" Golradir's question to Voldemort broke through Harry's thoughts. "Kicked me out of the womb, couldn't kill another and fouled up the kidnapping on this one? Thank the gods you're sterile.

"But not all roses for you, I see," Golradir resumed. "Pain, fatigue, sorrow, and death, always death. Oh, morsel, before I snuff you out, is there anything I can do to make it all better?" He gave her a charismatic, cynical smile that was met head on with a fierce glare.

"Yeah: bring Kaltagonus back."

Harry scowled as the Bellotaur invading his brother's body laughed, amused. "I'm afraid not."

But Ella pursed her lips determinedly then burst out, "Kaltagonus?"

"No use, morsel. I told you, he's dead."

"Kaltagonus, I know you're in there—"

"You're wasting your time."

"No!" Ella refused. "He's not dead!"

"It's my body: I would know if he was dead, don't you think?" The Bellotaur tartly replied, his fingers curling over the witch's wrist threateningly.

Harry searched Ella's fraught expression as she yelled out once again, "Kaltagonus! It's me, Ella: please come back! Tell him he's wrong, tell him he's dead wrong—"

"You've got the 'dead' part right."

"—Come back, Kaltag! You have to!" The red-haired witch shouted at the Being's face. "You have to come back, you owe me a date!"

"You—" Harry's heart leapt in his chest as the golden-eyed Celestial paused, just for a second before he scowled at Ella. "He's dead."

"We were supposed to go to Hogsmeade, remember?" Ella continued to talk, her eyes wide and glistening with unshed tears.

"Shut up." The Bellotaur hissed.

"And pretend we were stowaways from Beauxbatons," she continued, sniffing. "D-do you remember what you said your name would be?"

Golradir's eyes were hard and furious. "If you know what's good for you girl, you'll shut up right now."

"It was Balzac," her voice grew louder. "And when I asked you why, y-you said because you were feeling a bit nutty today."

Golradir opened his mouth to say something but stopped and shook his head dazedly. Suddenly bubbling with courage at knowing Kaltag wasn't completely gone, Harry belted out, "Yeah, you were a bit nutty today, remember?" Ella nodded at him encouragingly. "Remember what you told me in the greenhouse, about not hiding?" Golradir exhaled through his nose and jerked his head. "You've got to stop hiding now."

"Shut up, Potter."

"Listen to me, Kaltag: you wouldn't do this." Harry wriggled against the roots restraining him. "He's controlling you."

"You've got to overthrow him," Ella added. "You're stronger than him, I know you are!"

The Bellotaur's face contorted in a painful look and Harry chuckled madly as he saw a glimmer of blue break through the golden eyes for a split second. "You can do it Kaltag! If you can talk bloody Snape down in Potions and survive, this bloke should be no match!"

"Yeah," Ella nodded, trying to shuffle closer to him despite being held back. "Come back. Come back and we..." she choked, shaking her head vehemently to remain in control, "we could fly horses. You promised me we'd fly horses!"

Golradir's brow was creased, anger and confusion evident from his features. He was breathing heavily and gripping Ella's arm so tightly, her hand was turning blue from loss of circulation. He was wearing down. Harry felt the insane urge to laugh and pump his fists in the air victoriously. Only a few more minutes of this and Golradir would be gone! It couldn't have been easier!

Seconds later, Harry wanted to kick himself for being so naïve.

Pain blossomed through his body as Golradir roared, the flickering blue and gold eyes returning to solid gold. Harry's muscles seized and he felt the heat pouring through his body as the Bellotaur set his magic ablaze. "Fools!" He roared.

Through the agony, Harry forced his brain to kick in and work his mouth. "You're ... you're good!" He rasped between screams. "Wouldn't ... do ... this! Not ... kill!" He gasped as the pain spiked.

"Oh yeah, Potter?" The Bellotaur spat. Harry could feel long fingers wrapping around his tensing neck, squeezing. "And why should I listen to you?" The harsh words dripping with cruelty were growled lowly into his ear.

Harry could see the edge of his vision swimming, the pain was unbearable and his head thudding against the tree again and again while Golradir choked him wasn't making it any better. But still he persevered, ever the Gryffindor, as his green eyes rolling violently around in their sockets, caught and held on to Golradir's furious gaze. Parting his trembling lips, Harry fought to stop his teeth from clacking for but a minute to utter these words.

"Because ... I know ... you're ... my brother."

And with that whispered admission, the excruciating pain grinded to an immediate halt. Harry sucked in breath after breath of precious air, or as much as he could with the roots pressing down on his chest. He coughed and shook his head to clear away the cobwebs of his mind, hearing the relieved breaths of the others, and he immediately glanced around the clearing to look for the Bellotaur.

He stood a few feet away from him, shock befalling his expression. But it wasn't exactly Golradir; bright azure eyes edged in gold stared

back at Harry, stunned beyond words. Kaltag stood with his mouth hanging open, his fists clenched and looking very much lost in the poised, posture-perfect body of Golradir, staring at Harry. It dawned on Harry that he might've been waiting for him to say something.

"You ... know?"

The Gryffindor swallowed, wincing at the tolerable pain he experienced. With a crooked grin that he knew resembled a grimace, Harry replied, "I know. Everything." He suddenly didn't care who knew, despite the Quintessence's request. "I know you're my brother."

A brief stitch of pain bristled from his scar, and Harry noticed the uncharacteristic brightness behind the Dark Lord's eyes. "Kaltag?"

The Being started at his name and faced Ella, his eyes still wide and a mixture of blue and gold. "Ella."

"Yeah." She nodded, sniffing as she clutched her arm to her chest. She was covered with sweat and grime, and Harry couldn't tell whether she was crying or just perspiring. "Yeah."

His large eyes were fixed on her and the state that she was in. The Being then looked around the clearing as if seeing everything for the first time. And, Harry mused, it seemed as if he were seeing everything for the first time; when his gaze rested on the sword a good distance away, his round eyes suddenly seemed to notice the tattered clothing beside it. From there, it followed the long trench made by the root of Rodolphus' tree ... and finally the decapitated body beside it. The Paraffin's fists suddenly slackened and the Amenophus jewel fell to the dirt with a muted 'plop'. Harry could see Kaltagonus was about to shut down.

"Don't," he cleared his throat to get rid of the raspy quality. "Don't look at that," he drew the Being's attention to him.

"It wasn't your fault," Ella put in.

"The hell it was!" Rabastan fumed.

"Shut up! We'll just go to Dumbledore," Harry continued, "And sort this all out, all right? You just..." Harry's eyes threw a fleeting look to



the dark wizards and creatures, some of which amazingly still had a grip on their wands. "You just have to let us go, okay? Concentrate on letting the three of us," he nodded to Ella and the strangely subdued Kenward, "go."

As if on cue, Kenward throatily replied, "Yes. Just—just focus, Mr. Smythe. If you could control him before, you can control him now." The pale-faced, astonished Being nodded distractedly, staring at the grass near Kenward's boots.

It was a few minutes before Harry felt the burst of energy loosening the binds around him and his feet touched the floor. Kenward and Ella followed suit and Kenward bent to retrieve the amber-stoned necklace. All in all, Harry felt drained, both emotionally and physically, but he would worry about that later. Now, he had to concern himself with more pressing matters.

Like, for instance, how he could feel his elemental ability returning, and how his body was suddenly flooded with his magic again.

Not to mention how Voldemort and everyone else now had their bindings undone and their magic back.

Harry felt the pain sear in his scar as Rabastan cried, "You beast!" He turned to see Voldemort raising his wand at Kaltagonus, who had his back turned to him.

"NO!" Harry yelled.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Kaltag whipped around as the green light sped across the clearing, heading at breakneck speed for him.

"Harry!" The Gryffindor tore his eyes away from the Being as Kenward urgently called his name and hurled something at him before diving toward Kaltagonus. Harry reflexively caught the glowing Amenophus and turned toward the Defense professor just in time to see the Killing Curse crash into Kenward. He went down with a final thud, dead.

Harry looked up at Kaltag, but instead of finding the shocked boy he expected, he felt the dread surge through him once more as blue eyes were now blood red.

Golradir was back. And he was pissed.

His face had completely transformed into something out of one's wildest nightmares. His cheeks had hard plates like arrow points leading up to his eyes, and the skin above his eyebrows looked as if someone tried to push their knuckles through his skin. Golden symbols of glyphs and runes glittered ethereally down his arms, flashing every time he cracked his whip. Finally, Harry noted the sharp cone-like structures stretching out the skin at the Bellotaur's hairline, and when the wind lashed around his shirt, Harry could see sharp protrusions in succession down his spine. This was the beast he'd been expecting. He could have easily lived with what had happened if it had been this ... demonic Golradir that had killed Rodolphus.

The Bellotaur dogged the spell sent by Rabastan and Harry ducked, jumping away as the curse crashed into the trees and sent exploding wood raining down on them. He watched Golradir yank out the Ravenstone Scepter, but a Disarming Spell from the third Death Eater sent it flying into the bushes. As another hex rocketed in his direction, Harry quickly pocketed Amenophus and dropped to his hands and knees, elbowing his way to Ella.

He paused to cover his head as a whip of fire suddenly materialized in Golradir's hand and with a grunt, he cracked it over Hryczuk's snout. At the Hybrid's distracted squeal, Harry scuttled over to the witch crouched protectively behind a tree as Mona transformed into an as much unattractive creature as Jojo had, but with a serpentine tail in place of legs.

"We've got to get out of here and get help!" Harry yelled over the mêlée and the sudden appearance of lightning and turbulent winds nearly bending the trees in half.

Ella frantically shook her head. "No! We have to help him! We have to get through to him again!" They gave startled yells as a red-eyed Golradir slaughtered Csoztz with Hryczuk's discarded sword and the rank creature dropped beside them.

Pulling the witch away from the corpse, Harry looked over his shoulder and groaned as he saw the third Death Eater spouting a mouthful of blood all over the ground. "Look El—"

Sudden pain flared in his head and body and felt the stirrings of the forest around them. When the roots resurfaced and began to grab at his ankles, Harry grabbed his wand and was ecstatic to feel his elemental magic thrumming. He pulled Ella close as she wrestled with a twine of root.

"Away!" He commanded, though his voice was drowned out by the screams, snarls and roars of the many beasts locked in battle. They were fighting so fast and efficiently, Harry couldn't tell where one ended and another began. "Away! Away!" The roots obediently complied, slithering back into the ground. "C'mon!" He motioned the witch to follow him to the next tree, desperately trying to force his mind to come up with a plan to both help Kaltagonus and keep them alive this time around.

Harry grimaced as the Death Eaters' body parts littered the clearing and the stench of the dead Hybrid was making his eyes water. As Mona's tail thrashed at the ground, Harry couldn't help but notice Kenward's body lying face up a few feet away from him, a peaceful expression on his face. He briefly wondered why that was, the Killing Curse usually left its victims with a blank face. When the young wizard felt a scratchy claw creeping up his leg, Harry ordered, "Away! Away! Aw—"

Harry's eyes widened as he felt the cap on his magic again. "No, no, NO!" he protested as the roots wrapped around his legs and yanked him and Ella apart. His fingers scrabbled for purchase on the ground but the roots were too strong for him. Harry found himself pinned to the ground, the roots crisscrossing over his body, immobilizing him and covering his mouth with a muddy gag. He struggled against the restraints but the tight compression nearly cracking his ribs made him think better of it. Finally, there was quiet.

Harry could see Ella fidgeting beside him in the edge of his vision before sudden footfalls drew his attention to the dark face looming over him upside down. The beastly Golradir scowled furiously down at the Gryffindors, his scarlet eyes cutting through them like a knife. Somehow Harry knew this side of him was much worse than his golden-eyed counterpart. Harry swallowed a mouthful of dirt.

Golradir quietly turned to Ella, his croaky voice growling, "That was a very nasty trick, Seer." As Harry made sure his wand was firmly in hand, the red-eyed Bellotaur stabbed them with his gaze, freezing the young wizard in place. Harry was almost relieved when those malicious orbs dissolved into vengeful gold, his transformation dissipating. "And you, Potter; you were in on it, too."

The red-haired Being crouched over the bespectacled wizard, bending his weary face to his. Harry closed his eyes and swallowed nervously as a blood-spattered hand idly rolled an inky lock of hair around his fingers. "So you know what I'm going to do?" Golradir casually inquired, toying with his hair. "Hm? You don't?" Harry jerkily shook his head negative.

He hissed in pain as Golradir's hand tightened in his hair, yanking him close to his face. "I am going to kill you," the Bellotaur slowly confessed, his voice dripping with assurance. "Screw the Fates; to hell with the prophecy."

Harry grunted as his head was abruptly released, smashing back onto the ground as the evil Celestial rose to his feet. He absently heard the ground rustling as he tried to writhe free, and watched as a root carried Hryczuk's bloodstained sword to Golradir.

By this time, Harry was in full-blown panic, desperately trying to get some hold over his elemental ability to undo the twine around him. He blinked when blood dripped onto his face as the sword was raised and tried to drown out Ella's muffled screams of protest.

Harry refused to lose hope even though it seemed the roots tightened around him to keep him still. He still fought the bindings even as a stern-faced Golradir raised the sword and whispered quietly into the night, his golden eyes sparkling with animosity.

"So long ... brother."

Harry bit hard into his gag as Golradir let the blade drop.

Without warning, a blast of blue light collided with the Bellotaur. A stunned but relieved Harry watched as he was thrown like a rag doll across the clearing and heard him crash against a tree. The

Bellotaur's raspy, mirthless chuckle sent shivers down Harry's spine; he could hear Golradir clambering gracefully to his feet and popping his bones.

"Well, well, better late than never." The Bellotaur began. "I've been expecting you, Spardonosos."

Harry twisted his head sharply in the direction of the blast's origin, stunned to find the lustrous Ravenstone Scepter being brandished by none other than the one who started this all: Spiridon Smythe.

oooooooooooo

A/N: One chapter left! I'm so psyched! Please review!

A/N 2: I'll be out of town for a few days, so if you don't get an immediate response to your review, just know that I'm not ignoring you.

## Chapter Thirty-Six: The Messenger (aka, Men Were Deceivers Ever, Part I)

Golradir smacked his lips and began lithely circling Spiridon, the General cautiously mimicking his stance. "Still the council's little lap dog, I see." Harry could see him thumbing the hilt of the sword thoughtfully as Spiridon's grip tightened on the Scepter.

"Like the new body?" Golradir presented, motioning to himself. "Don't worry; I'm not into rent-to-own anymore."

"Let my son go." Demanded Spiridon.

"Ha!" The Bellotaur snorted. "Your son? Pretentious bastard, aren't you? You're even more deluded than I originally thought. I am so ready to give you a taste of your own medicine."

Harry groaned in pain when Golradir stepped on his thigh as he passed. "Less bark, more bite, you parasite." He heard Spiridon's low growl.

Golradir nodded his head decisively and pursed his lips, his golden eyes bright and mischievous. "If you insist."

The two lunged at each other with dual war cries, metal ringing in the air as sword and scepter clashed in a display of bright sparks and steel. Harry cringed as the men moved fluidly above and around him and Ella and the remaining prisoners, their grunts of battle echoing throughout the forest. He couldn't tell whom from whom as the noises all sounded the same to him, but he noticed the binds around him slacken a little bit each time Golradir seemed to be bested.

At last, Harry felt the roots release him just enough and the warmth of his magic flooding his body as a blue light lit up the clearing, followed by a loud crash against one of the trees. Without hesitation, he willed the twine to worm away and blasted the last roots off of Ella with a spell. Wordlessly, she grabbed his hand and followed him to the safety of the thick trees, dodging jets of light from both savagely brawling Beings and leaping over corpses. Harry pushed her head down as a nasty purple torrent crashed overhead, raining splinters all over them.

"We've got to get out of here," he breathed, shaking off the wooden shavings. When Ella opened her mouth to protest, Harry quickly delivered, "D'you want to get killed?"

Her expression soured, and she looked extremely peeved to be thwarted. Harry sighed, cursing inwardly as Spiridon and Golradir fought mere feet away from them, the heat of their attacks making the air crackle. "I want to help him, too," he exasperatedly confessed, "but he'd kill us as soon as look at us!"

Ella's eyes glittered darkly and her lips were a tight, thin, disapproving line. Harry was unnerved at how much of Mrs. Weasley he could see in that expression now. "He's your broth—"

Movement in the brush caught Harry's eye and he quickly turned toward it. Before he could even get his wand at ready he was shoving Ella away from him as an explosion of green light hurtled in his direction, immediately destroying the tree behind them. Harry's feet failed him as he tried to get up and he tumbled into a ditch, landing in a crumpled heap.

He groaned, spitting out a mouthful of mud and grass as he struggled to his feet. The dazzling lights from the warring Celestials illuminated the darkened grounds as the moon was suddenly masked by thick clouds, but Harry could already see that it would be incredibly difficult to get up the steep ledge by himself. Luckily, his problem was short-lived.

"Harry!" He heard Ella call for him aboveground. Her vivid red hair appeared first over the ridge followed by her concerned expression. "Are you—?"

"Fine," he replied, swallowing thickly as he spotted Jojo's discarded body not too far from him. "But I can't get up there by myself." He accepted her offered hand and with her help, was pulled over fairly quickly, just in time for his blood to boil at the sight across the clearing.

"Bellatrix!" he hissed, nearly falling over the edge again as he unintentionally released the witch's hand. Harry clambered over the ledge and darted around the trees and into sight, momentarily forgetting the scuffle blazing before him. Spiridon was sporting a gash above one eye but it hadn't slowed him down. Golradir had

once again changed into the scarlet-eyed creature, nearly foaming at the mouth as he snapped his jaws and swung Hryczuk's sword with deadly promise.

But Harry didn't care about that; his gaze immediately sought out the crazed dark witch standing across the glade, the shadows on her face more prominent and pale in the flashing lights from the Scepter. Her eyes looked as haunted and unhinged as they had in the Department of Mysteries and her knuckles were white, attesting to how firm her hold on her wand was. Harry's own wand felt slick and hot in his hand as he squeezed it, glaring at the Dark-wending witch. Bellatrix's gaze never left Voldemort; she probably hadn't even cared that her husband was dead.

And suddenly, Bellatrix gave an ear-splitting shriek and fell to the ground. Voldemort and Mystikos soon crumpled after and Harry briefly wondered if the Aurors and Dumbledore had arrived before he felt the searing fire in his blood return with a vengeance. His knees painfully hit the ground and he thrashed around on the earth, fighting the liquid fire that seemed to consume his body.

"You fool," he heard Golradir's harsh voice pressing down on the air. "You can't win and you're a fool to think that I'd make the same mistake twice." Harry gasped sharply as the pain receded to a dull, niggling ache. He boldly raised his eyes to survey the scene: Ella was twitching on the ground not ten feet away from him, her red hair matted and caked with dirt and debris. The Lamia and Hryczuk were practically snarling, despite the visible trembling fit they seemed to be fighting.

Bellatrix had scrambled to her feet, wand raised and the Killing Curse halfway spoken before Mystikos pushed her wand down and gave her an admonitory look. She lowered her wand, rather unwillingly, after a curt, confirming nod from Voldemort.

Harry's eyes were drawn back to the Bellotaur, who seemed to have some sort of power over the General as Spiridon kneeled on the ground before him, the Ravenstone Scepter's glow deadened and just about lifeless in his hand. He was breathing unevenly, and Harry could see the muscles in his neck stretched taut from Golradir's torment. His appearance was disheveled and Spiridon wore a number of cuts and bruises on his face. Though in the face of



Golradir's fury and self-assurance, the General only exhibited the boldest defiance.

Golradir's mouth stretched into a villainous smirk, his triumph apparent. "You've got guts, stable-hand," he softly began, his fingers curling around the hilt of Hryczuk's blade in a calm dance of anticipatory victory. Spiridon remained quiet, his breaths now sharp and his brow soaking wet from the strain. The Bellotaur airily chuckled as he leaned close to the Celestial, leveling them eye to eye. Harry swallowed at the malice in his gaze.

The beast sneered. "You held him back, ruined his life, his childhood and happiness... All of that," his calm voice carried over the steamy air, "...for nothing. Way to go, dad." Golradir stood to his full height, smirk firmly in place as Spiridon glowered at him and twitched. The blade made a decisive 'whoosh' sound as Golradir raised it and hissed, "It's time to surrender; to say goodbye, pathetic victor o' mine."

Harry's eyes widened as the angry General's face split into a grin. Wasn't the man about to die? What could he possibly be smiling about? Movement from Spiridon made Harry's brow furrow as the Scepter appeared to have lost power and Spiridon's free hand was tangled in his robes. Across the way, Harry could see that Bellatrix, Mystikos and Voldemort were riveted to the scene, their wands lowered and their eyes cautiously narrowed.

"You fought a good fight, but not nearly good enough. Any last words, Spardonosos?" Golradir prompted, sword raised and expression annoyed, as if he grudgingly had to honor the General.

His mouth curling upward at one corner, Spiridon casually replied, "Yes." A slight crease formed between Golradir's beaded eyebrows as glittering gold eyes graced the dark-haired General with a skeptical look.

"Well?" The Bellotaur barked, his impatience evident as his fingers drummed restlessly on the hilt of the sword. "Get it over with, stable-hand, and say your goodbyes already."

Harry swallowed as the disturbing smile never faltered on the man's face. The wind rustled his heavy cloak and Harry could barely see

his other hand dug deep into his robes, his hand grasping firmly at something, something unseen, something deadly.

With a slight nod of his head, Spiridon uttered, "Goodbye."

Faster than Harry could blink, Spiridon whipped out his black wand, pointed directly between the Bellotaur's eyes and shouted, "EXPULSUM PERVASOR!" before Golradir had even registered what had happened.

With a loud 'thud', Hryczuk's sword clattered to the ground and Golradir's hands grabbed tufts of his red hair as he violently shook his head and belted an earth-shattering cry, a beaten cry that shook the earth and caused the trees to flail as the wind whipped them.

"NO!" Harry whirled around and grabbed Ella before she dove into the brilliant shield of magic, desperately trying to keep a hold on her as she struggled to fight him off. "Don't kill him!"

"Ella! Ella, no!" Harry yelled, clawing at her clothes and careless as to whether he'd seized her so tight that she'd bruise.

"He's gonna kill him!"

But for some reason, Harry didn't think so. No matter how much deception and trickery Spiridon had done, he didn't think the man would have it in him to kill the Being. Somehow the Gryffindor knew Spiridon would die before he'd murder Kaltagonus, even if the Bellotaur possessed him.

"He's not," he breathlessly whispered into her ear, his arm thrown across her middle and pulling her tightly to his chest. "He won't." Soon after, the fight left her, but between the thundering noise from the wind and the roar of Golradir, Harry thought her dry sobs were the loudest.

Golradir's mouth stretched in his unnatural scream, and he fell to his knees; Harry could see the intense spasm of his muscles clenching and unclenching, his hands tensing so hard around his skull Harry was afraid he'd crack it with his bare hands. Spiridon held his wand on the golden-eyed beast, waves of refulgent light pulsing from his rod and seemingly swirling around the writhing Bellotaur in some sort of Containment Spell.

As Spiridon muttered a constant stream of Latin and Greek under his breath, Harry's eyes noted a shift from the other side of the clearing. The Dark Lord and Bellatrix were sneering at the display, his crimson eyes flashing with dark glee and her wild eyes darting around the area. Her behavior was skittish as usual, and she was clutching her wand in one hand and something bulky in the other.

Voldemort was scowling, probably displeased that he didn't get a shot at the Bellotaur himself, his pointy nostrils flaring and his ruby eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. He stared at Golradir's fit as if studying a chessboard to weigh his next move when his eyes finally met Harry's. If possible, they narrowed even further—Harry happily returned the look—before they unexpectedly widened and his old, familiar smirk began to unfold.

"Ouch!" Harry flinched as his scar gave a sharp flare, reviving his headache, and he pressed it against Ella's cool hair to relieve it slightly as his hands were full. Harry knew that smirk meant trouble; trouble for him, at least. Before he could read more into the dark sorcerer's look, Bellatrix ducked into the brush, Voldemort and his minions quickly following after. "Voldemort!" Not one to give them escape without chase, Harry released Ella and bolted after them, ignoring the witch's calls and darting around the sizeable dome a sweating Spiridon had created to surround the Bellotaur and tore into the bushes.

It wasn't hard to track them: the trees stirred with disturbance and Hryczuk's stench could make a skunk cry foul. Harry batted away the leafy claws and fought to keep them in sight, grateful for the intensifying orange glow lighting his path as they closed in on Hogsmeade village. "Voldemort!" He grunted, peevishly hoping the dark wizard would trip on his robes and fall face first into a thorny bush.

A blast of red light lit up the darkness and gave him pause. Harry ducked low to avoid being hit by the curse; Bellatrix's dry cackle was unmistakable. Gripping his wand tighter, Harry rose to full height and continued his pursuit. He had to dodge several more spells sent his way (some harmless, others unmentionably deadly) from both Bellatrix and Voldemort's throaty yells. They didn't seem to be slowing down at all as Harry continued his dodge and run tactics.

Unfortunately, the group only seemed to quicken their pace toward the ginger glow, and the dull sounds of their shoes hitting the dirt path forced Harry to run faster; they were practically in the village now. Harry sighed in relief as the trees thinned and he made it to the path leading to the Shrieking Shack. He could see Voldemort and the others making for the village, but Harry skidded to a halt on the trail, his eyes as wide as his lenses, horrified.

Hogsmeade was on fire.

Several buildings including Gladrags, Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, Zonko's, and, to Harry's horror, Honeydukes and The Three Broomsticks were all up in smoke. He could see the dark shapes of the Death Eaters spewing fountains of flame from their wands and villagers and shop owners who were brave enough to face them countering their attacks with Aguamenti before they fell victim to the Avada Kedavra and other such nasty curses. Suddenly, the jovial Death Eaters halted their attacks at the sight of the Dark Lord and began abruptly vanishing, Disapparating away. Mystikos and Hryczuk followed, disappearing with a ripple.

"Voldemort!" Harry shouted, raising his wand, his head pounding and his hands clenched into fists upon hearing the despairing wails of the shop owners. The wizard in question calmly spun around to face Harry, his expression quietly pleased and his eyes reflecting the fire and damage he was proud to have caused. Bellatrix smirked condescendingly and lifted her wand at a sharp angle, ready to blast Harry to pieces but a pointed look from the Dark Lord had her all but cowering, as her dignity would not have her display her fear so openly. Then she, too, Disapparated with a sharp 'crack'.

Harry turned his wand on Voldemort, matching his stance, both of their wands at ready. "Tell me, Harry Potter," he began, his ruby eyes mirroring the inferno around them. Harry's mouth fixed in a vengeful line as the dark wizard leered, his bestial face even more unsightly in the firelight. "Does he mean everything to you?"

Harry paused at the unexpected query, but held his wand aloft. "After all that he has done, all the pain he's caused us—least of all you, his own blood," The Dark Lord idly questioned. "Can you still call him brother," Voldemort raised his eyes to Harry's challengingly and his scar throbbed, "when he is the very thing you despise,

against the very principles you oppose, and the very person you detest ... me?"

"He isn't you!" Harry spat, his green eyes narrowed and appalled that Voldemort would suggest such a thing. "He'll never be you."

Voldemort snorted. "Dear boy, you are blind. I know a valuable weapon when I see one, despite its shortcomings. Do you really think you can turn the beast from his ways and bring him to your side where his ... talents," the Dark Lord drawled distastefully, "will fritter away to nothing?"

"Yes," Harry replied without hesitation. "I can. I'll keep him from going Dark like you."

"You waste your time. He'll kill you and your company of Muggle-loving idiots whether your back is turned or not. You cannot keep him from being me. He already is me."

"No!"

"Do tell that brother of yours, Potter," Voldemort's gaze lowered to something in his left hand that Harry couldn't make out, but his blackened smirk spoke volumes. "My offer still stands ... and I'll be waiting. This ... is just the beginning." Harry's breath came out roughly and his fingers tightened around his wand, the vibration of his magic sending waves of furious power through his body.

The Disarming Spell was halfway across his lips when Voldemort barked out, "Morsmordre!" and went after Bellatrix with a disappointing 'crack'. There were several screams from the Hogsmeade residents as their burning world was lit up with the sickly green glow of the Dark Mark.

Cursing inwardly, Harry lowered his wand and beat a hand on a nearby tree, fuming. They'd escaped again; and who was Voldemort to try to fill Harry's head with doubts? Golradir hadn't completely taken over Kaltagonus; he'd make sure that he wouldn't.

The smoke billowing from the buildings and the grating sound of wood succumbing to fire brought Harry out of his reverie and he was torn between helping the villagers and going back to check on the

others. His decision, however, was made for him as he happened upon a very unusual sight.

Vaguely, it was still odd to see his Potions professor on a broomstick, despite the small number of Quidditch matches he'd refereed. Snape had come with Daedelus, who was riding Ensediis, both with determined looks on their faces. Harry wondered if he'd been spotted and confirmed it as Daedelus motioned in his direction and tugged the winged horse's reins toward him, Ensediis smoothly turning toward the tree line and giving one last powerful beat of his wings before he landed gracefully. Snape descended quite stiffly from his broom, giving Harry one of his patented death glares as he strode up to him.

"Potter!" he spat, the fury in his deadly tone evident. His sallow complexion looked especially wan in the Dark Mark's light. "By no stretch of the imagination—!"

"Where are the others? Where's Kaltag?" Daedelus urgently cut in, ignoring the dark look from the hook-nosed professor. Harry swallowed, his throat suddenly very dry and feeling very tired and overwhelmed.

"In the forest," he replied, his voice winded and sounding of someone who had just run a marathon. Daedelus didn't let him finish and all but pushed him back into the wood, urging him to lead them as best as he could. Harry didn't think it'd be that difficult: all he had to do was follow the shining glow emanating from the trees, and if that didn't help, the gale-forced winds and sounds that closely resembled that of a snarling beast caught in a cyclone were definitely course enough. The Gryffindor, however, made to head for Hogsmeade. "But—"

"They can handle it, Harry," Daedelus briskly replied, driving Harry back into the trees. "The others will soon be here to help." Defeated, Harry had no choice but to take the Vice Admiral at his word and escort them to the clearing.

Harry led the men through the trees quickly and efficiently, suddenly finding himself eager to get back to Kaltagonus. He'd sincerely hoped Spiridon hadn't changed his mind and decided that the Being had known too much. But would the General be able to murder the

boy he raised as his own? Harry couldn't let that happen; he quickened his pace.

The sounds of Golradir's incensed growling and cries steadily grew louder until Harry could see the outline of the dome, even more brilliant than before and felt the wind sweeping his hair in his eyes. Snape had a mildly astonished look on his face, while Daedelus gaped at the lashing, spitting Celestial, his pupils so small his eyes were entirely gold. His face contorted into barely-masked fury as his body trembled violently and the dome's glow began to recede. Golradir snapped his head in Spiridon's direction, pinning the General with his livid gaze.

"Don't think you're free of me yet, stable-hand!" He growled between his convulsions, his eyes bulging so large, Harry could easily trace the veins rising beneath the surface of his skin. Spiridon mutely continued to direct his wand at him, the Ravenstone Scepter swirling agitatedly in his hold, as his face remained grim.

"Let go of him." The General's icy voice demanded. Golradir released a gruff chuckle of dissent. "I said LET HIM GO!" Spiridon roared.

Golradir writhed on the ground, opened his livid eyes and bellowed, "NEVER!"

Daedelus' mouth remained hanging, his expression more perplexed than unnerved. "This explains a lot." He absently stated.

"Harry," said Gryffindor suddenly had an armful of Ella Burton, tears streaked in the dirt on her face making muddy trails. Though she appeared relieved to see him, her tone was hollow and deep, just like the time she had made the prediction about the Child of Phoenix, but this time it was much quieter, more burdened. She held his forearms in a vice-like grip, her eyes glued to the convulsing Celestial.

The sudden press of his shirt against his throat as Snape seized the back of his robes and dragged him up momentarily brought Harry back to his presence. "Potter, what is the meaning of this?" Snape demanded, his black eyes glittering dangerously. "What have you idiot children been up to?"

Snape's interrogation was cut short and his grasp loosened as Golradir began to scream again, a yell so unbearable Harry thought it could've split his very soul in two. He strengthened his hold on Ella, clasping her wrists tightly as she made a move to stop Spiridon, but his eyes were locked on Golradir.

Gone was the gleaming bubble that kept him inside and instead, the gold runes were again racing over his skin. His eyes blazed white-hot in their sockets and he curled into a ball on his knees, his fists banging the dirt as his screams increased. Harry wondered what was afflicting him when he saw it.

A strange radiance like fire burned through Kaltag's shirt, but it was no spontaneous fire. Rather than engulf the clothes in flame, it remarkably burned quite slow and deliberately on the boy's arched back. Tendrils of gold from the runes seemed to bleed down the curve of Golradir's spine to manifest itself into an unknown shape, shielded by wisps of gold. Quite abruptly, Spiridon jerked his wand in the air, breaking the connection and thus, the spell. Golradir yelled and shook one last time before the blustery drafts ceased and the clearing fell eerily silent.

The symbols on the Bellotaur's skin still glittered with life, albeit faintly, as it appeared their magic was siphoned into the golden particles of radiance at the base of the beast's spine. Finally, the golden light brightened one last time before it, too, began to fade into a faintly glowing, red-hot, unrecognizable mark. Before Harry could get a closer look, Golradir unexpectedly straightened. Everyone but Daedelus and Ella had their wands up not a moment later, awaiting the Bellotaur's first move.

Golradir wavered on his knees, the fight seeming to have gone from him. His eyes were wide and stark white, staring directly down the barrel of Spiridon's wand. Harry tightened his hold around Ella's arm as she tried to pull away. He dared not speak for fear of calling unwanted attention to themselves and experiencing more of the murderous beast's wrath.

"Kaltagonus?" Spiridon tentatively croaked, his wand an inch from the boy's face.

But Golradir remained unspeaking on his knees, vacillating gently back and forth, shredded shirt hanging open, his hands loose at his



sides, his expression utterly blank, white eyes wide and his lips slightly parted. He resembled the picture of complete innocence. It only caused Harry to grip his wand tighter.

And suddenly, milky white eyes softened into blank gold irises, and Harry heaved a great breath of relief when the gold gave way to normal, unfocused blue. Harry lowered his wand slightly, and distantly realized he was shaking.

Spiridon's shoulders slumped, relieved, an oppressive sigh leaving him as he clutched his forehead and swept a hand through his hair. He cast a brief glance at Harry and the others before he aimed his wand at the unresponsive Being and spoke a sharp spell in his native Greek. His wand let out a short burst of white and at once, a gleaming silver cuff encircled the Celestial boy's wrist, almost melding to it, seamless in design and engraved with more symbols.

When the General sighed again, a freeing sound this time, Harry found himself expectantly staring at the man. The dark-haired Being first looked at Ella, then Harry, before pointing his wand once more at the expressionless Paraffin.

"Evincio." He whispered. Blue light shot like a bullet from the General's wand and straight into the Being's eyes. The azure orbs livened, their pupils widening until only a rim of blue remained, before falling blank once more. Spiridon pursed his lips and dropped the faintly glowing Scepter to the forest floor. His eyes alighted on the small group waiting with breath bated, and he gave Harry's eager look a grim nod. "It's over. He's been exorcised for now."

Harry stared, dubious. "For now? You mean he'll be back?" The thought made his skin crawl.

"Not tonight." Spiridon resignedly assured, shaking his head. "Not tonight."

Harry shut his eyes and sighed, restraining the urge to laugh hysterically. Nightmare. That was the only word that could best describe the entire experience. God, what a terrible night: but it was over. For now, a niggling voice in the back of his head reminded. Completely, utterly, absolutely over: no Voldemort or Bellatrix or vampires to fight. Harry suddenly recognized his gaffe as the bushes

crackled and he cursed himself. He really should learn not to speak so soon.

A sudden whoosh of air unsettled the trees and a large dark blur leapt out of the brush and wrapped itself around the impassive teenager. It was Mona, Harry realized, the Lamia with the serpent tail. Wands were aimed her way, and Harry was mentally flitting through the list of spells he'd learned about for use on vampires.

Mona twitched and molded her form to Kaltag's, her scaly tail coiling and flicking around his legs. Her purple eyes twinkled maliciously in the moonlight as her rotted bony fingers caressed the Being's face. Harry frowned as she lovingly nudged his cheek with her decayed nose, inhaling his scent and running her scaly hands over his exposed skin. "Let him go you foul beast!" Daedelus ordered, his fists clenching.

The hideous Lamia merely sneered, her long canines glinting in the moonlight, and answered his demand by abruptly sinking her fangs into the exact punctures left by Jojo Six. Kaltag finally reacted, his body tensing as his eyes squeezed shut and he gasped painfully. Mona's violet eyes seethed into angry red as she bit down hard, sure to leave a bruise. Just as suddenly as it began it was over, with Mona shoving Kaltag away from her, spitting and throwing over her shoulder as she blended into the evening, "Now we'll be able to find you wherever you run!"

Daedelus was there to catch Kaltag before he pitched forward into the dirt, frantically yelling, "He's been Marked!" The panicked soldier flipped the unconscious Kaltagonus on his back, his hand reaching for the piercing wound bubbling red and gold blood from his neck.

"No!" Spiridon yelled, moving swiftly to slap the Vice Admiral's hand away. Daedelus looked up at Spiridon, startled. "His blood is poisonous." Spiridon explained, leveling his wand at the redhead.

"But sir, he's been Marked." Daedelus repeated with urgency, standing to his feet.

Harry's brow furrowed, confused. "What does that mean?"

"Judging by the Lamia's attitude, I'd venture a guess as to say she certainly meant what she said," Snape silkily informed, ignoring the

Gryffindor's question. His black eyes scrutinized the Celestial boy for a brief moment before he added, "Rest assured, she will make good on her promise: indeed she will be coming for him."

"Then we'll Cloak him," Spiridon resolutely supplied. "They'll find someone else to avenge their clan member on." Harry watched the men exchange tacit glances before Spiridon instructed, "Severus, you know the incantation." Snape's expression soured for a split second before he aimed his wand at the inert redhead.

"Very well, stand back."

"No, wait—use mine," Spiridon interrupted, handing him the long black rod. Snape's eyes gleamed with vague recognition before he accepted the proffered object, albeit stiffly. When Spiridon stretched his hand for the Potion Master's, Snape regarded him with a hard look. "The backlash of the spell will be forceful so you're going to need a bolster if you use my wand," he stated, his eyes drifting to Daedelus. "And we're going to need someone to bind him if it doesn't go as planned. You'll, ah, need a wand..."

Spiridon began searching the ground, whirling around as he struggled to see in the darkness. Harry vaguely wondered what he had been searching for when Spiridon bent over the Defense professor's body and began rifling through his pockets. "Should I even comment on your lack of respect for the dead?" Daedelus vacuously said. Spiridon leaned over to hand him what he'd obviously been looking for—Kenward's wand—and he said something to Daedelus that neither Harry nor Ella could hear.

"Stand back." He told Harry and Ella, motioning them to the sidelines. Harry wordlessly obeyed, grabbing Ella's shoulders and pulling her away when she didn't budge. The General turned to Daedelus, who had halfheartedly raised his wand to Kaltagonus and said, "If it doesn't work, I want you to throw the strongest Binding Spell you know at him." Though his brow creased and he looked ready to protest, Daedelus nodded. Spiridon pointed his wand behind Snape and motioned for him to begin.

Snape wrapped both of his hands around the long shaft, and aimed it directly at Kaltagonus. After a moment's pause he shouted, "Delitescio!"

A blast like gunfire sounded from the wand and threw Snape back at least ten feet in the air, but Spiridon had spoken a Cushioning Charm in time. The Potion Master landed on the invisible, pillowing shield and slid down to land on his bum with a sharp grunt. When Harry felt Ella's body tremble with suppressed laughter and saw Daedelus bowing his head as well, he couldn't help the snort that escaped his throat.

Luckily, Snape hadn't heard them and he swept gracefully back to his feet, brushing the leaves from his robes and handing Spiridon his wand back with an unreadable look. For all his movements were calculated and even-handed, Harry noticed the slight color spread thinly across his pallor cheeks. Snape brushed the long strands of hair from his face and silently demanded the return of his wand with an outstretched hand, holding it at ready as the men inched toward the heap known as Kaltag Smythe. The situation didn't seem quite as amusing anymore.

"Is he...?" Ella quietly trailed, freeing herself from Harry's embrace.

"He's Cloaked," Spiridon answered, sweeping his wand over Kaltag's body. "She won't be able to find him."

Daedelus broke from their arc and dropped to his knees, pressing a hand on the unwounded side of Kaltag's neck. He heaved a sigh of relief as he snatched Spiridon's wand and began to murmur diagnostic charms. "You didn't kill him."

Spiridon gave the Vice Admiral an annoyed look. "Of course not. Why would I kill my own son?"

Something reared in Harry at his words. All at once everything he'd learned that night came crashing back to his mind: the Quintessence, the memories, his mother. Harry felt the anger well up in him and he glared a hole in the back of the General's head.

"He's not."

The three black-haired men turned at Harry's whispered declaration. Spiridon gave him a warning look, but Harry didn't care. The bastard needed to be put in his place.

"What's that, Potter?" Snape snarled, striding up to him and seizing the front of his robes in his fist as he drew Harry close. "You had better come up with a damn good explanation as to why you had to throw yourself headfirst into danger yet again, I might add, without seeking the consultation of a qualified adult." Snape's voice had steadily risen in intensity until he was practically spitting into Harry's face. His black eyes found Ella and his glare turned even nastier. "What is it with you Gryffindors and needing to surpass the bounds of stupidity your bravery seeks to test?"

"Severus."

Harry scowled at the ranting professor. "Perhaps you all will finally learn when your cursed gallantry gets you killed!"

"Severus!" Spiridon admonished, prying the man's long fingers from Harry's clothes. "They've been through enough tonight. Back off." Snape frowned deeply at the command, throwing Harry one last glare before he glided away from the Gryffindors.

"Sir," Daedelus beckoned as the Celestial wand's tip flashed red. "I've detected the presence of foreign Essence in him—which, is to be expected, considering—but this Essence hasn't borrowed from his own force: it's ... tampered with it."

The General's blue eyes widened and he regarded Kaltagonus in alarm. Quickly, he rounded on the Gryffindors. "Did either of you see this happen?"

Harry and Ella exchanged a bewildered look. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Spiridon exhaled urgently and pressed, "When you arrived here, what did you see?"

"Um," Ella began, sighing as she scratched her head anxiously. "I don't know, I mean ... You-Know-Who was here with his Death Eaters and two ... horrendous vampires," she burst out, riled at the memory, "and a few Hybrids and he was torturing information out of Kaltag." Her brown eyes fell on said Being with sympathy. "The next thing I know, we're being tortured by..." she trailed, looking away from Kaltag.

"Harry?" Daedelus encouraged, his eyes wide with expectation.

The dark-haired Gryffindor sighed, rubbing his pounding forehead. "It's like she said: we found Voldemort and Mystikos here torturing Kaltag, then Golradir, uh ... came out." He finished lamely.

The Battalion soldiers' eyes flashed at the mention of the Dark Prince. "Mystikos was here?" Spiridon replied. "Did he do anything? Anything that made Kaltag slow down or acquiesce?"

Ella shook her head no, but the sudden memory of Kaltag being caught in the forest fluttered across Harry's mind. "Yeah," he began uncertainly. "He, uh ... breathed, on him." Harry haltingly answered, shaking his head in puzzlement. "Mystikos said something about how he Compelled him and called him—"

"What? Is he mad?" Daedelus erupted, fuming. "He could've killed him!"

Harry couldn't imagine that being breathed on could cause sudden death, no matter how foul the person's breath was. Daedelus must've seen his confusion, because he explained, "Compulsion was used by Celestial fathers in earlier times to soothe and placate wayward children, but not anymore. Men and children were dropping like flies, dying, because Compulsion is an exchange of essences, of life force; everyone has a force and essence specific to themselves. To change or add to another's force, to tamper with it, could cause devastating results. If a father Compels their child and the child isn't strong enough magically for the internal battle, well..."

Harry nodded, the unsaid thought understood. To meddle with someone's life was to possibly destroy it; why had Mystikos taken that chance?

"Did Kaltag react?" Spiridon asked.

Harry nodded, skeptical. "Yeah. He went lax for a moment, but then he was fine. Fighting, a second later."

The General sighed, relieved, dragging a hand wearily through his hair. "Then he'll be fine. As Daedelus said, it's just a way parents used to discipline their children. Very dangerous, practically outlawed, now."

"Then why'd he do it?" Ella questioned.

"It's his way of recognizing his young: by smothering him in his scent, his essence," Spiridon unpleasantly informed. "In his sick mind, he believes himself to be Kaltag's father."

Harry's face scrunched in confusion. "But ... Mystikos isn't his ... " Ella started, shaking her head in incomprehension, turning her look on Harry. But the Gryffindor was busy thinking, thinking about other things. About red hair, a narrow nose, and bold emerald eyes.

Lily's eyes.

Flashes of his mother's determined face and her defiance in the children's nursery flicked across Harry's mind one after the other. His brow lowered over his narrowed eyes and he accusingly finished among the silence, spearing the General with his glare, "And neither are you."

Spiridon's gaze was hard, steely at best, and he threw Harry the most infuriating look he could muster. "That's a very serious accusation, Mr. Potter." His furious eyes betrayed his calm voice. "Perhaps you hit your head harder than you realized."

"I DID NOT—"

"Clearly," the General coolly stated over Harry's yell, piercing him with a withering look, "the boy is delusional. He's in shock and he hasn't a clue what he's saying."

Harry was furious, his magic fraying at the edges and his breath coming in shallow puffs. He wasn't going to let him twist this. Not this time. "You bastard, you—!"

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for vulgar language." Snape disrupted, glowering at him.

Harry huffed, scowling at the ill-tempered professor. "But you don't understand, he—"

"But I understand perfectly, Mr. Potter," Snape sneered, standing toe to toe with the Gryffindor. "You are grasping at anything to lay

the blame on for your stupid mistakes. Rest assured, you will not win me over by regaling me with tales of your awe-inspiring acts of heroism. Another twenty points for false accusations and failure to take responsibility for your actions."

"Professor Snape!" Ella protested, scandalized. "You're being completely unreasonable about this—"

"And you can't even begin to fathom the amount of points you'll lose for being in the Dark Forest without supervision and cavorting about Hogsmeade village when you clearly are not supposed to!" He rounded on her.

"Severus, leave them alone."

"Don't try to defend me!" Harry snarled, knocking Spiridon's hand off his shoulder.

"Mr. Potter!"

"Excuse me!" Everyone's objections died on their lips as Daedelus broke through the group, beside himself with disbelief. "In case you hadn't noticed, we're in the middle of one of the most dangerous forests this side of the Northern Hemisphere, surrounded by dead bodies, no less," his voice rose angrily as he gestured to the corpses, "we've got an injured boy here, and I'm not a Mender. Can we take our angry accusations and pathetic tirades to the school where we won't get mauled by some ravenous creature?" Everyone stared at the red-faced second-in-command, some gaping. "Please?" Daedelus crossly added.

He had a point, Harry conceded. They weren't out of danger yet: this was still the Forbidden Forest, after all. Not to mention Hogsmeade was probably still burning; Harry hoped they put out most of the fires, but still knew the village was more than likely destroyed.

They had to get back to the school to patch themselves up (he'd only realized his ribs were aching from being bound so firmly) and let Dumbledore and the others know about the Death Eaters and Kenward. Upon thinking of Kenward, Harry's hand instinctively fingered the smooth outline of Amenophus in his pocket.



Snape narrowed his eyes at Daedelus, then nodded once. "To the school," Spiridon voiced, his eyes lingering on Harry for a moment. "The Infirmary."

"You don't say?" Daedelus tartly replied, pulling off his coat to drape over Ella's shoulders. She gratefully thanked him and wrapped her arms around herself. Daedelus bent down to scoop the limp Being up and throw him over his shoulder. Harry winced at the sight of Kaltagonus flopping around like a rag doll. "I can't believe you still have this," Daedelus grumbled as he handed Spiridon the black wand. He accused, "You told me you'd gotten rid of it."

"Never mind, Daedelus; help them." Spiridon insisted, glaring.

The Battalion soldier grunted, indicating that Ella should lead the way back to Hogsmeade. "Right! Right, right, right!" He grumbled, pushing a branch down so Harry and Ella could pass. "I just witnessed my protégé nearly murdered by a vampire and exorcised by his father. Yeah, I'll forget all about that!"

For as wild as the evening had been, the walk through Hogsmeade to Hogwarts was uneventful. Except for Ensediuss whinnying wildly at their appearance and refusing to go anywhere near Daedelus and his quarry, it seemed their excitement was over for the night. Harry was pleased to note that most of the fires had been contained and put out by Aurors and some of the Hogwarts staff he recognized. But the damage was done: Hogsmeade was in ruins. Even if the residents and shop owners rebuilt, the quiet, lively parish would never be the same.

Harry sighed, glad to reach the front steps of the school. The front was emptied of thestrals and carriages, a sign that the guests had long departed from the grounds. They were met with equally frightening silence at the entrance halls, and the torches along the walls were dimly lit. Harry expected panic and frenzy at the realization of events, but it seemed Dumbledore had seen to it that everything would go as smoothly as possible. Still, it was very unusual for them not to have run into anyone, not a prefect, or a professor.

The Infirmary was still as sterile and disquieting as always, the bedclothes starched and the floors polished and white, the beds casting blue and gray shadows on the moonlit floor. The Gryffindors

followed Daedelus to the bed most distant from the doors and they quietly watched him deposit Kaltagonus on the cot, his expression troubled. In comparison to the sheets, Kaltag looked even paler and more ill.

"Why don't you two grab a bed? I'll ... I'll get Madam Pomfrey." Daedelus offered, marching toward the Mediwitch's office. The Gryffindors stood by Kaltag's bed as he left, silently keeping guard of the unconscious Being instead. Although Harry didn't think it would do much good: how could they protect someone from themselves?

The moment Madam Pomfrey rounded the corner Harry knew the watch was over. She frowned at the sight of them and immediately dragged them into separate beds, much further down from Kaltag's, and forced them to lie down as she bustled over them. As she was checking Ella for any ailments, Harry noticed Mender Magus appear over Kaltag's still form, a frown marring her face. With Daedelus' help, Kenward's wand still in his possession, she dragged the curtains around the bed and they disappeared from sight.

"Really, Mr. Potter," Harry was startled from his thoughts as the formidable nurse stood over him with a puckered brow. A quick glance at Ella showed she was already passed out, asleep. "Why am I not surprised to see you?"

"Wouldn't be a normal school year if you didn't," Harry grumbled, rolling his eyes as she pushed him further into the pillows.

"Well, be that as it may," she sniffed, waving her wand in circles down his frame, "I expected you quite sooner: a new batch of antiseptic especially for magical creature injuries arrived just the other day and I thought of you. Dragons," she groused in an undertone, obviously remembering the Triwizard Tournament in his fourth year. "But you're in here entirely too often as it is."

"I'm going for a record, you know," he moodily returned with a tight smile, his eyes still on the unmoving curtains surrounding Kaltagonus. "It'd be a shame to mess it up by giving in now."

"Be careful Mr. Potter, or I might think you're deliberately injuring yourself to be in my company."

Harry exaggerated a defeated cluck of his tongue and dryly replied, "Caught me. My dastardly plot—revealed. Was I that obvious?"

"Really." Madam Pomfrey harrumphed again, though Harry would later swear that he'd seen her lips curve upward at his words, and cleaned him off with a spell before she applied salves to soothe and disinfect the cuts on his face and body.

"The best medicine for these bruises is time," she enlightened after she'd wrapped them with a creased, sympathetic brow. "So if you're planning to participate in water sports this summer and are, ahem ... sensitive about your appearance," Harry rolled his eyes skyward. "Until they fade, I would advise leaving your shirt on, Mr. Potter."

Harry sighed affectedly, shaking his head. "There goes the world tour. I was so hoping to get my kit off for the ladies..."

"I'm sure your lady-killing can withstand taking a backseat to your health."

"It seems to be doing just fine on you."

"Pity there isn't a cure for excessive wit."

"Pity." Mimed Harry.

She smirked and Summoned a vial of green potion from her stores. "Headache Potion." When Harry's eyebrows fell in bemusement she huffed. "Really, do you think I wouldn't know you by now?"

"Still, it's a bit disconcerting."

"Then keep yourself out of trouble next time," she sternly countered, pointing her wand in the direction of the wardrobe. A pair of striped pajamas landed in a neat pile at the foot of his bed. "Change into those and drink the potion slowly—all of it, and I mean that, Mr. Potter—as it has a mild sleep aid laced in. I expect to return here in ten minutes to find you counting unicorns in your sleep."

Harry gave her a cynical look and unblinkingly deadpanned, "Unicorns."

Madam Pomfrey raised an eyebrow in challenge but Harry decided to stay quiet. She threw him a small, victorious smile and pointed her wand at the drape, which snapped shut around him. With a deep sigh, Harry began the arduous task of peeling off the rest of his muddy clothes. He'd almost forgotten about Amenophus until the amber jewel fell out of his pocket and onto the floor. As Harry picked it up and shoved it back in, he tried not to remember Kenward throwing it at him before he was hit with the Killing Curse. It took a bit longer to undress than he'd expected with his sore chest and ribs and memories, and Madam Pomfrey must have known because after ten minutes, she hadn't returned.

When at last Harry fastened the last button on his shirt and settled beneath the sheets with a grateful sigh, closing his eyes, he heard the screen rustle. "I know, take the potion, I was just—you!"

Harry's eyes opened a fraction before they widened and he lunged for his wand, which he'd unwisely left in his jeans. Suddenly, his arms snapped to his sides and he was thrown back against his cot in a form of the Body-Binding Curse, only with black tendrils of smoke weaving around his body like a light, makeshift rope, strong enough to hold him down and gag him.

"Now, now, Mr. Potter: don't do anything foolish." Spiridon stoically reproved, his wand held casually in his hand, piloting the black rope. Harry felt the weight of Silencing and Privacy Charms spring around his cot and narrowed his eyes as the man sat a chair beside his bed, sinking onto it. "You're rash and impetuous, just like your father."

Harry tried to fly at him again, but the smoke kept him pinned to the bed. Surprisingly, the thick cloud muzzling him peeled back to let him talk. "You bastard." He ground out. "I stood up for you when he said bad things about you," Harry heatedly replied, disregarding the man's words. He couldn't believe he had the nerve to show up and attack him after all that he had done! "I defended you!"

"I never asked you to," the General unflappably responded. "So you'll excuse me if I don't thank you." Harry scoffed, throwing everything he had into a death glare for the Being. The man barely blinked. "There are things you don't understand, Mr. Potter," the dark-haired Celestial quietly stated. "You didn't see the whole story; that's why I'm here."

"I don't care!" Harry hissed, struggling against his bonds. "This is all your fault!"

Spiridon bowed forward, his wand still trained on the Gryffindor. "I am not the enemy, Harry." He quietly declared.

"Oh, and my mum and dad were?" Harry growled, desperately willing the smoke to let him free so he could punch the General square in the face. "What'd my mum ever do to you?"

Spiridon paused, his dark blue eyes gleaming with thought, seeming to examine Harry's words and he sat back, just slightly. "Nothing, really. It wasn't her fault. On the other hand, had it not been for your idiot of a father, Golradir would have never made it out of that orb."

Harry fumed. "Shut up! If it wasn't for you, I would have known my brother."

"And had it not been for my wife," Spiridon sneered, "your brother would have never survived."

"But if it hadn't been for my parents," spat Harry, fighting the swarthy wisps, "you would have no son!"

The Being's eyes glittered, unreadable, before he softly acknowledged, "You're right." Harry blinked, suspicion creeping up his spine. "You're absolutely right."

"Then you admit you caused this!"

Spiridon regarded him distantly. "You're forgetting: I wasn't the one who tortured Lily Potter into losing her child."

"But you might as well have! You made her into that overprotective witch," Harry growled, realization suddenly dawning on him. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You frightened her so much, that she used Love Magic to protect me not only from Voldemort ... but from you," he whispered, revolted at the thought. "Didn't she?"

Dark eyes considered Harry coldly, Spiridon's long fingers rubbing at his wand as he calculated his next answer. "I did what I had to do."

"You did this for yourself, you selfish git!"

"Yes," Spiridon tipped forward in his chair, looming over Harry with a scowl. "If you're asking me if I don't regret your mother losing the child, then yes," he breathed, his face screwed up in aggravation. Harry felt sick to his stomach. He didn't think he could hear any more of this. "I don't regret it, not at all ... because I gained mine back."

Harry's brow was drawn in bafflement as the General sighed heavily, slumping back into the stiff hospital wing chair and rubbing his eyes. "I have few regrets in my life, Mr. Potter." A troubled look passed his face before Athena's husband lifted his head and stared into Harry's defiant, livid eyes. "One thing I regret is how everything played out for your mother ... but I can't regret the gift she'd given me. It's ... not my fault, nor hers, nor yours. Like you, like ... your mother," he faintly began, fiddling with the sheets on Harry's bed, "And like Kaltagonus, I am a victim of Golradir.

"You ... heard his words in the forest," Spiridon smiled, a somber smile, as Harry's urge to resist the bindings lessened. "The words he used: stable-hand, victor ... Spardonosos," Spiridon shook his head, pursing his lips. "I haven't been called that in nearly four millennia." Harry's eyebrows shot into his hairline. Spiridon nodded with a grim smile. "Yes, that's right. When I killed Golradir the first time, I had a life, and I was hardly older than you are now."

Harry sagged into his cot, rolling his eyes. "Spare me the sob story." He griped, scowling at the General when the cloud of black smoke wrapped around his mouth again, shutting him up. The urge to cuff Spiridon in the head increased tenfold.

"I'll wager a guess that you don't yet know what it's like," Spiridon darkly resumed, "to come home from a hard day's work, twenty or so tasks under your belt while the rest of your people are off warring over a lover's quarrel." Spiridon bitterly explained.

"To rush to market before it's closed, because your wife failed to remember the food for the sacrifice; to come back from the agora to dead silence from a town that once bustled with life; to walk into your home to see your parents' bodies, their blood painting the walls and the beautiful frescoes you'd spent your entire life admiring," Harry swallowed, but the tightening in his chest hindered its progress with every despairing word from Spiridon's mouth.

"To run into the fields to find your wife, murdered, her life staining the harvest red," the General's eyes were empty and distant. "To turn to only discover your son, your only boy, who had just learned to ride a horse, mangled in an awful heap.

"To happen upon the soulless wretch that caused the deaths of your people, your family, and to pick up that sword and slay him in a rage: only to find that he had indeed got the last laugh and his wretched blood poisoned your own, sentencing you to a painful death..." Harry forced himself not to think of such images, but his mind couldn't avoid them.

"Then to be saved from death, wooed by promises of threefold blessings from the men and women to whom you now owe a life debt, only to be cursed, coerced to guard the very filth that shattered your world," Spiridon's emotionless gaze made Harry's breath catch in his throat.

"And then to finally realize the one who destroyed countless civilizations and massacred your family, your wife, your son ... lives in the very boy that I call my own, whom I love so ... fiercely, that I condemned him ... to save him?" Spiridon finished in a strained whisper, the challenge in his tone present. Harry could only swallow, his mouth dry as the smoke choked him and he suddenly felt cold and helpless.

The General's eyes hardened, then narrowed as he shook his head slowly. Harry tensed as he was lanced with a spiteful glare. "You don't know pain. You don't know suffering. You don't know me, Mr. Potter. Do not presume anything."

An edgy silence followed Spiridon's confession and Harry looked away to allow him some semblance of privacy as the man bowed his head to compose himself. Though Harry still thought the man was a git for everything he'd done, he was beginning to understand quite the quandary that Spiridon Smythe found himself in.

Rather soon, Spiridon's mask of cool indifference returned to his face. "Now, Mr. Potter," he sullenly began. "Have you anything else to say? Perhaps more accusations to hurl at me?"

When the cloud lifted from Harry's face, the young wizard swallowed, sorting his thoughts carefully before he spoke. "Even though I'm beginning to understand why you did it," he cautiously chose, "I still hate you for what you've done to my parents."

Spiridon shrugged dismissively. "Understandable."

"What you did was selfish ... and barbaric."

"Yes," Spiridon agreed, his gaze piercing Harry's. "But it was also necessary."

"Was it also necessary for me to know all of this?" Harry brought up, curious. "The Quintessence told Kaltag to keep this from me—"

"Until the right time, yes," Spiridon nodded, expression pinched. "For all the intelligence they possess, they still rely on superstition and Fate."

"Won't they know?" Harry asked. "That I know?"

"I'll take care of it."

The memory of the Quintessence reminded Harry of another niggling discovery. "My mother," he hesitantly prompted. "Why was she there?"

Spiridon's brow arched. "I would think that was obvious," he drawled. "She's part of the council; she's filled in as Mercy."

"So does that mean my dad's Morality?" Harry asked, hopeful.

His face fell when Spiridon shook his head. "No. I'm afraid the search for a new Morality doesn't take precedence over Golradir."

Harry stared at the smoky coil keeping him restrained, thoughtful. "But my mum, why did she appear at the end? Why wasn't she there while Kaltag was around?"

The Celestial graced Harry with a serious look. "It was at your mother's behest," he stated, but Harry knew there was more to the story than he was being told. "And for Kaltagonus' sanity. If he knew Lily was there, ohh, the things he'd do; his reaction would be violent,



and we could not have that happen. If he had seen Lily, then he would have been more readily acceptable to Golradir, and I would not have gotten him back so easily. Kaltagonus cannot know everything, not this conversation and certainly not Lily's involvement with the Quintessence. The knowledge that you two are brothers should never have even come to light."

"But ... then why are you even bothering?" Harry pushed, angered that this was kept from him. "Why was I even told? Why did we even meet? Isn't it fate or destiny or luck that we even met each other? That this year, the year the Celestials and Wizards reunite, we'd find each other?"

Spiridon frowned, his thumb tapping the end of his wand, pensive. His blue eyes met Harry's persistent stare head on, and he finally answered, "As I said before, there are few things that I regret. Unsurprisingly enough, your mother is one of the selected few." Harry felt the sourness rear up in him again. "I made a promise to your mother the night she discovered who Kaltagonus really was. I promised that I would do everything in my power for the two of you to know each other."

Harry nodded, miffed by the smoke that still pressed him down. "That was the easy part, getting us together."

Spiridon smirked grimly, chuckling to himself. "In order for me to make good on my promise, I had to find a way to get you two together. Now, I could not have sent Kaltagonus to Hogwarts: besides having an unfair advantage over the students, an early exposure to magical interference would have brought the latent Bellotaur out too early. Not to mention, Celestial and Wizard ties were severed. No," Spiridon shook his head, "Kaltagonus needed to go to Aripedes, ground himself for a while."

"Right," Harry nodded, though it was difficult and awkward from his position. "And by chance, Aripedes was attacked and the old laws went into effect."

A wide grin split Spiridon's face, and Harry suddenly felt the ever present cold chill run down his spine again. It was a grin that Harry had only seen on those who had just wrought havoc. Those like Malfoy, Bellatrix, Snape, and—dare he say it—Voldemort. He gulped.

"Yes, but in order for those laws to take effect a valid reason had to have emerged. A reason, for instance, like one of Youngblood's weapons being found."

Harry froze, his eyes as round as saucers.

"And let's imagine this information reaches the wrong ears ... say, for example, a Death Eater's ears."

Harry gaped. Unbelievable.

"And say the sniveling minion went to his master to share the good news," Spiridon wryly continued. "And then said Dark Lord realizes the caliber of this discovery and decides to call on an old friend for help once he realizes the origins of the weaponry. Let's imagine, perhaps," Spiridon leaned on his knees again, his voice dropping to a furtive whisper, "that the same person who informed the Death Eater—unwittingly, of course—now drops the hint to the Dark Lord's old friend that Youngblood's weapon resides at the world-famous Aripedes Academy."

Harry swallowed, his eyes still bulging. He couldn't believe it...

"It was you." Harry exhaled sharply, incredulous.

Spiridon nodded once. "It was I who secretly alerted Mystikos to the Scepter being possibly hidden at the school. I knew if there was anyone who could catalyze this plan into action it would be trigger-happy Mystikos. One can always bank on his penchant for destruction. In his demolition of the school, he all but hand delivered Kaltagonus to you. So yes, gathering both of you face to face was my doing, as to honor the oath I made to your mother. Add to that the Scepter, which is by rights his anyway, and your appetite for adventure, and the rest wrote itself.

"However, I do admit that I did think Hogwarts was a much better-equipped place to handle Golradir once the Scepter was found out," Spiridon ponderingly considered. "The wards here are much stronger, and you, being his balance, could ground him." Harry made a face at the words, still unsure of what they meant. "Had Golradir surfaced while at Academy, it's safe to say there would be no more school, no more island, and no more student body left to fill

a teaspoon. Better earth and stone, than innocent lives." Harry nodded, agreeing. "It was just better this way, and I don't regret it."

The silence following Spiridon's revelation was deafening. To think that this entire year had been orchestrated from the very beginning was quite a distressing feeling. Worse yet, being kept from the truth, as the Quintessence had demanded was downright alarming. That those deceased prats, that anyone would allow his mother to suffer—to lie to both him and his parents, just to keep the Cosmos in order, rubbed Harry the wrong way.

"If that is all, Mr. Potter," Harry started at the General's deep tone, "I have some business to attend to." Just as Spiridon rose from his chair and grasped a handful of white curtain, a dangerous thought bubbled to life in Harry's mind.

"Wait," he called, the tight feeling in his chest intensifying and constricting his breath even more if possible. Spiridon paused, eyebrow arched in question. "I have one more question." The General bodily turned toward Harry, nodding for him to continue. Harry felt as if he couldn't breathe.

"Did ... did Dumbledore know?" It was as if a hand was squeezing his heart, destroying him little by little as he awaited an answer. If the headmaster had known: about Aripedes, about Lily, about Kaltagonus, and kept the truth from him... It felt as though a troll were sitting on his chest.

Finally, Spiridon answered, "No," with a shake of his head. "We took special measures to make sure our operations were devised to circumvent his awareness. Honorable though he is," Spiridon expressed, "Dumbledore is too inquisitive for his own good."

The tight feeling eased in his chest, but not completely. "Good night, Mr. Potter," Spiridon threw over his shoulder as he made to exit. "Oh, and one more thing." Harry's eyes narrowed as the General held his wand at his side. "Breathe a word of this conversation to Kaltagonus and I'll make sure you'll regret my upholding your mother's request." Harry scowled, his hatred for the man returning full force.

With an upward flick of his wand, the smoky tendrils came back to life, slithering over Harry's form and winding their way toward the startled wizard's face. Harry's resistance was futile as he still

couldn't move, and he had no choice but to breathe in the smoke that blacked his vision. He felt a sudden wave of dizziness as the dark cloud wormed its way down his throat and nostrils, tasting of burnt rubber and blurring his sight for a few moments.

Spiridon motioned to the vial sitting on the bedside table and it immediately levitated into the air, the vial unstopping itself and moving to hover over Harry's mouth. Without control over his muscles, Harry's jaw instantly snapped open, and he tried not to gag on the cool potion that tasted faintly of mint and chocolate and lemon.

As the empty vial plugged itself up and settled back on the table under Spiridon's steady hand, Harry's glasses slipped off his face and folded themselves, floating down to rest beside the drained potion vial. The wizard felt the immediate effects as his pounding headache ebbed, his eyes drooping as the sleep aid wrapped itself around his mind, relaxing his body. He felt Spiridon drop the paralyzing control he'd had on him.

The General's whisper drifted across his sleep-fogged brain. "Not a word, Potter. Kaltagonus has enough on his mind now, than to worry about Lily. Now," Spiridon's pitch went up an octave as he straightened his robes and smiled tightly at Harry. "If you'll excuse me, I need to see my son." Spiridon's eyes bore into the sluggish green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived before he swept the curtain aside and ended the spells around his cot.

Harry turned on his side, fighting against sleep to think about what Spiridon had just confessed, but it was a losing battle. The last thing he was too see before he fell into a fitful rest was Spiridon's dark and fuzzy form rounding the blocked off cot that held Kaltagonus, the tormented man's charge.

Spiridon's ward. Lily's heartache. Harry's brother.

oooooooooooo

A/N: That concludes part one of the three part conclusion. Tell me what you think!

A/N 2: The secondary title comes from Shakespeare's comedy, Much Ado About Nothing. Expulsum means to drive out, expel, force out, banish and pervasor means invader. Evincio means to tie up,

bind, meaning to hold Golradir back and keep Tag in control. Delitesco means to hide away; I put it as the charm that Cloaks Marked persons. Mona Marked Kaltag for killing Jojo, one of her clan members, and to avenge her death, she Marked him for death. Comprende?

A/N 3: If you're confused about any Celestial aspects or just COP in general, visit the Messageboard on the site (check the profile for the link) with your question. If it's not a major plot point in the next stories, you'll get your answer. Also, can anyone guess what the threefold blessing was in Spiridon's little rant that would've made Wiglaf proud? The next chapter might be up by tomorrow, so look out for it.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Messenger (aka, Shall Find Me Unafraid, Part II)

From the moment he'd been thrust into the wizarding world's limelight there were three things Harry Potter was constantly aware of, to the point that he at times almost considered quitting school, packing his things and joining his godfather to live off rats and stolen food. Almost.

One was the brand reminding him relentlessly of Voldemort, the very title he was sure he'd loathe to the grave: the Boy-Who-Lived. Just thinking about it made the Gryffindor want to score his eyes out with a spoon.

The other was usually stated with compassion and sorrow, followed by a pat on his head or back, and an offered handkerchief to the now watery-eyed speaker. Harry couldn't count the times he'd been told how much he looked like his father, James. As an impressionable eleven-year-old, he'd been ecstatic that someone could tell him about his parents' lives and share their memories. Now, it was somewhat of a curse for him being stopped in stores by witches and wizards he'd never even heard of telling him how he was the spitting image of his father.

Except his eyes. They'd say it every time with the identical hitch in their breath: he had his mother's eyes. Hence, the third constant reminder. Though he had to admit, he didn't much mind being told over and over again that he had Lily's eyes. He was grateful to get any information on his mother, as his aunt Petunia wasn't exactly forthcoming with her memoirs.

But now, Harry realized not only were these things irritating to have repeated over and over and over again ... but the people that entertained him with such mournful news were also dreadfully blind.

It was still night when Harry awoke in the hospital wing, staring at the snoozing redhead in the cot beside him; it was still dark, but Harry had noticed something that his admirers failed to detect after some six years of fawning and wistful recollection.

He had Lily's nose. Not James'.

Insignificant though it may be, Harry couldn't overlook the fact that both he and Kaltag sported the same narrow, curved nose, Lily's nose, and not James'. He vowed that the next time someone from forgotten past approached him with sympathies and paused to say how much of a carbon copy of James Potter he was, Harry would smile—smugly—and bring to their attention the difference in their noses. If need be, he'd start carrying a picture of his parents just so he could hold it to his face and prove them wrong. Ha! Lily's nose. Take that, you blubbering brownnoser!

"You look just like your father, Harry," they'd soon start to say, "but you've got your mother's eyes. And her nose, bless your soul! You've got your dad's looks and your mum's konk: You-Know-Who doesn't stand a chance against that bulbous snout..." Harry chuckled to himself, turning back to the sleeping Being in the next bed.

His laugh died on his lips as he soon stared into wide, pulsing golden eyes. Before he could even reach for his wand Golradir was on him in a flash, his fingers closed around Harry's neck and Amenophus' raised blade glinting in the moonlight.

The Bellotaur smacked his lips and growled, "I've got mummy's nose, eh?" He snickered darkly. Harry's hands circled the beast's wrist and he tried to pry the hand from around his throat, gasping for breath, but he was too strong. The manic Being lowered to Harry's ear hissing, "Do be sure to tell her that for me when you see her?" Harry's eyes bulged as he let the blade fall—

Harry shot up from his cot with a yelp, suddenly awake. He groaned groggily as he was met with the gleaming white of the hospital wing walls, sunlight streaming through the windows. Harry swallowed and forced himself to calm down; his chest was tender from all the hard breathing.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," Harry turned toward the large hazy blob that was Madam Pomfrey. He squinted his eyes and felt the coolness of his glasses pressed into his hand. "Here you are. You're not discharged yet; I'll be right with you. Don't try to escape." The prospect of being let out of the hospital wing soon made him fully waken.

Harry hastily slipped on his spectacles and blinked around the buttery glow of the infirmary, his eyes quickly scanning the room for

the others. Madam Pomfrey appeared to be doing a final examination on an antsy Ella and Mender Magus was transporting sizeable crates that clinked and tinkled every time they were jarred. Kaltagonus' cot from last night stood neatly done up with the linens clean, blanket folded and the hard pillow fluffed, empty. The Being was nowhere in sight.

Harry was a bit worried that they'd let him out so soon, especially now with this Golradir issue. His stomach gave a turn when he thought about last night. With a resigned sigh, Harry pushed off the blanket and swung his legs over the side of the bed, impatient to be released.

"You'd be able to get out of here faster if you'd only hold still, Miss Burton," Madam Pomfrey griped, wrapping fresh gauze around Ella's forearm. "Honestly! Everything is an urgency with you children, isn't it?" Harry rolled his eyes and started to dress in his clothes from last night.

"Ah! Wait, Mr. Potter, not you, too." Madam Pomfrey criticized. "This is still my hospital wing and only I give the O.K. for a patient's release. Last I'd checked, you were still my patients—will you sit down, Miss Burton? The next time you move, I'll Body-Bind you, myself!" Ella scowled, crossing her arms and sinking to the mattress, put out.

Madam Pomfrey hummed, clearly ignoring the Gryffindors' impatience as she smoothed on the last bruise ointments and assessed fading scars. "There! I declare you physically fit to join the rest of society, Miss Burton. Emotionally, however..." She trailed off, a trace of amusement in her tone. "Off with you. And please, try not to be drawn in by Potter's charm next time: you're too lovely a girl to fall in with his crowd."

"Hey!" Harry protested, throwing Pomfrey a scandalized look. "I'm right here, you know."

Madam Pomfrey smirked dryly, poking and prodding at his bandages. Harry flinched and hissed. "I'm aware, now sit still." Ella muttered a quick thank you to the busy nurse and peeled out of the infirmary, either to escape Pomfrey's coddling or something completely different. As the witch glanced back over her shoulder at Harry suspiciously, he realized that 'something completely different',



was him. He fidgeted restlessly, suddenly anxious to catch up with the ginger-haired witch.

"So eager to part with my company already, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey drawled, her wand drawn and whispered spells streaming from her lips.

Harry bit back a groan as she pushed a sore spot on his ribs. "Figure I'd better get a head start on that lady-killing."

Pomfrey scoffed quietly and murmured, "Fleeting youth. Some days I yearn for that." She inspected the cuts on his face and sighed rather weightily, then collected his discarded pajamas. "Very well, go on. Do take it easy on those ribs." She brandished a finger at him and shook it before his nose as he hastily stood. "And I don't want to see you in here again unless you're on your death bed and half of your body is missing."

Harry made a face. "That's ... incredibly morbid."

Pomfrey's mouth curved in a smug grin. "Well, that's the idea, isn't it? Off you go." Harry smiled at her, throwing a quick thanks over his shoulder as he darted after his housemate.

The corridor was empty, strangely enough, and Harry wondered what time it was. For the school to be this empty wasn't normal. He quickly dashed up the next corridor, desperate to catch Ella. With everything that happened last night, he couldn't just forget what he'd learned about her. The wizard released a frustrated groan as the next hallway was vacant, save for a painting or two, and he moved up the familiar path to Gryffindor Tower. As luck would have it, Harry eyed a familiar mane of red hair swishing around a corner and he rushed after it, the corridor echoing with his shouts.

"Ella! Ella! Hey Ella, wait up!"

But the witch was ignoring him, picking up her stride and plodding up a stairway. "Not now, Harry." She grouched in annoyance.

"Hey, just a minute! I need to ask you something!"

"I said, not now."

"How long have you known?" Harry stated, watching her freeze at the top stair. Ella's back remained facing him for a stretch before she turned around, her expression piqued. But Harry didn't care for her anger or for her annoyance. In fact, he was quite irritated himself. "How long have you known about Ron?"

"Shh!" She hissed, stomping down the stairs and gesturing madly. "Do you want people to hear you?"

Scowling, Harry turned to a portrait of a seedy-looking man surrounded by relics. "Do you want to hear a secret?" The man nodded eagerly, practically pressing himself against his frame, his eyes glittering with excitement. Harry ignored Ella's black look and jerked his thumb at her. "D'you know my mate Ron Weasley? Well, she's his—"

A soft hand clamped over his mouth, shutting him up and guiding his face toward heated brown eyes, eyes that he'd only noticed resembled Ron and Ginny's all too well, along with her red hair and, most notably, her temper. He allowed himself to be dragged to a nearby unused classroom and let her free some of her anger by jostling him roughly inside. When the door was slammed shut, the red-haired witch rounded on him. "What do you want, Harry?" She asked, exasperated.

The green-eyed wizard frowned, crossing his arms as he leaned on a grimy desk. "How long?"

Ella sighed, scratching at her head while she shook it. Harry forced himself not to get angry at how much of his best friend she now seemed to embody. "Since December; maybe ... the end of November?"

Harry gaped. "You knew for this long and you haven't told him? That's ludicrous!"

"I had to stay away from them both to make sure."

"And it took you this long? What's to make sure: red hair, brown eyes, nasty temper—a four-year-old could figure that out!" Harry incredulously growled. Ella threw him a foul look and glowered. "Were you ever going to tell them?"

"You don't know the whole story." She stated with a scowl.

"What's to tell?" Harry argued. "You've known about Ron and Ginny since November and you haven't said a thing!"

"I've got valid reasons!" She claimed.

"What's a bigger reason than your family?" Harry growled back, towering over her angrily.

Ella's face noticeably fell, remarkably going from livid in one second and sad in the next. She looked away from Harry's heated gaze and folded her arms, slumping against the door. When she spoke, her voice was low and quiet and she shook her head slowly. "There isn't one."

Harry's brow furrowed, confused. "If there's not one," he calmly began, "then why wait this long? You've known for months and you're still letting them on."

"They've moved on," she indifferently stated. "To go back would only reopen old wounds."

"You wouldn't be an old wound to them." Harry disagreed, indignant on the Weasleys' behalf.

"Still," Ella stubbornly replied, holding his gaze firmly. "I've got other things to consider, like my own family."

Harry reared back as if burned. Was she serious? His eyes narrowed, disbelief etched in his face. "So you're going back, then? Back to the very people who kept you away from your real family?" He accused, outraged. "The people who kidnapped you?"

"No," she quickly retorted, pushing off from the door to confront him. "I'm going back to the people who raised me. The cowards who kidnapped me—the Death Eaters who kidnapped me," Harry's eyes widened fractionally behind his glasses, "handed me off to my parents the second the Aurors were on their tail." She bitterly confessed. "They knew about me, about Apollo's gift; thought I was useless without Ron. But they knew I was far more valuable alive than dead. So they dumped me near the Burtons' campsite and fled."

Ella's deep scowl softened as she remembered, shaking her head at thoughts Harry wasn't privy to. "I don't regret knowing them: they didn't know about the abduction until the Death Eaters returned last year. They were every bit the parents I know the Weasleys probably would have been, but to abandon my father now would be much crueler than to let the Weasleys wait a little while longer." A dark shadow passed over her face then. "At least until I get my hands on Bellatrix—"

"Bellatrix?" Harry blurted, staggered and bemused. "As in Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Ella sharply nodded. "Who do you think was the Oracle You-Know-Who wanted—Trelawney?" They both scoffed and snickered at the ridiculous thought. Ella's amused expression suddenly turned somber as she turned away from him and swept her fingers through the dust on the chairs.

"I know you don't understand, Harry, but I have to go back. You see, my father, he's..." she swallowed, blinking her eyes and lowering her head. "He's not well. The Death Eaters, after they'd escaped from Azkaban last year, came to Little Hereford. My parents, well, they realized too late that they were looking for me, so they made me hide away from danger. Bellatrix, she recognized my mother, and ... well..."

Harry nodded, noting the witch's throat bob and her eyes grow shinier. "And they tortured my father, and he's not been well at all. I didn't even want to come here this year, but he insisted I'd be safe. So I can't just leave him, Harry," she turned to him, all traces of sorrow and helplessness gone from her face. She looked determined and unwavering in her decision. "To leave him now, when he probably won't make it through to Christmas..." she shook her head, her tone softening towards the end of her words. "No. I won't. I can't."

Harry's shoulders slouched. "But Ron—"

"Ron can wait." She insisted, mulish. "My father can't."

"And I understand, but..." Harry exhaled sharply, stumped. "Look, I don't keep things from my best friend. You can't expect me to keep this from him!"

"But you must!"

"Why?"

"Because!"

"Because why?" Harry pushed.

"Because I'm not ready!" Ella yelled, freeing a frustrated breath. "And they're not ready, and ... I can't handle the Weasleys now, especially this soon." She turned on him, her eyes irritated. "I can't leave my father to die, Harry. Not even for my birth parents ... or Ron."

Harry's throat bubbled with a disbelieving laugh and he shook his head, stunned. He understood she wanted to be with the man who had raised her, but surely she could've told the Weasleys? They would undoubtedly support them both with open arms, of course! Besides, it wasn't like he had asked her to desert the man, just to tell Ron the truth. So why was she being so difficult?

"Harry," he turned his head at her voice, but remained with his back to her. "There will come a time when I get to know my real parents and rather ... extensive family. But for now, let me keep this secret and stay with my father. I will tell Ron when the time is right."

The Gryffindor sighed, dragging a hand in his hair and making his mop of curls even messier. "I understand, I really do, but Ron is my best friend," he whispered urgently. "If he finds out that I know this, that's it! He'll never talk to me again! If he finds out that I kept his sister away from him—kept the Weasleys away from you, their daughter and sister, they will never forgive me."

When her face hardened, Harry could almost feel his friendship with Ron disappear along with her sympathy. "I'm sorry, Harry. I can't do that. The health of my father takes priority over your friendship. I hope you understand that. And I hope you know to keep your mouth shut."

Harry realized that a lot of people seemed to be telling him that lately. He shook his head firmly. "Sorry. I can't do this."

Ella's eyes narrowed spitefully, twinkling with mischief reminiscent of the twins. She briskly nodded and made for the door. "Fine. Then I'll tell Ron and Hermione about Kaltagonus."

Harry's eyes widened and he froze, faltering. "W-what?"

Ella gave him a cool look over her shoulder. "If you're going to spill my beans to Ron, I should spill yours to him, too."

"You can't," Harry replied with complete lack of finesse. He made his way to the door and braced it shut. "You cannot tell them about Kaltag."

The red-haired witch smirked complacently at him and crossed her arms in a defiant fashion. "A bit hypocritical, aren't you? You won't tell Ron and Hermione about Kaltag but I have to tell Ron that I'm his sister?"

Harry knew he was well and truly caught. He fumbled for an argument but could only come up with an unconvincing, "It's not the same thing."

"Oho!" She mirthlessly countered, visibly peeved.

Harry gave her an indignant glare. "It's much more complicated than it seems."

"Well, then," her tone challenged. "Now you know how I feel."

"I need to figure this out for myself, to think about it." Harry contended.

Ella cynically pat his shoulder and turned the doorknob. "Ooh, don't hurt yourself."

Harry seethed. "Ella!"

"Sorry, Harry." She bristled with quiet rage. "You keep my secret, and I'll keep yours." With one last warning scowl, she left the grimy

classroom and closed the door with a 'snap!' leaving Harry mulling over his thoughts.

He was completely trapped. Ella had turned the tables on him and exposed something he hadn't even thought about or made a conscious decision on. Harry had always assumed he would tell Hermione and Ron about something this serious, but now faced with the actual scenario, he realized he didn't want to. If he could go back to five minutes ago, when faced with the question, he wasn't sure he would answer any differently.

In fact, he knew his answer would be the same. He loved his friends dearly, but deep down, part of him wanted something secret, something private, something his, that only he knew about. He'd had that for a short time with his elemental ability, but even that had come out to Ron and Hermione. And while Harry hadn't felt upset or bothered that they'd known, he hadn't felt at all guilty for keeping it from them. It was his business, after all: he needn't tell Ron and Hermione everything. Especially something as problematical as he and Kaltag being ... related.

Now Ella, on the other hand, would have been a much easier confession to make. Of course there would be a period of time when disbelief would reign and proof would be needed, but afterward they'd find out the truth and celebrate her return. Her story would be easy to explain and they'd go on despising Voldemort and his followers. But how was he going to look Ron and Ginny and Mrs. Weasley in the eyes, knowing, all the while, that the sister they never mentioned but could be seen haunting the backs of their eyes, was alive and well, and he knew? How would he defend that against their reproachful looks?

Even worse, how could Harry begin to explain about Kaltag? That Kaltag had passed from Lily's womb to Athena's? That the reason he knew this was because he'd been in Kaltag's mind? Not to mention the Golradir mess; Harry winced just thinking about it. No, it was best he keep that to himself. It was safer that way, the fewer the people that knew.

With his thoughts more troubled than they were settled, Harry pushed himself off the desk and left the classroom to trek to the common room. The sooner he faced Ron, the better. Not that the bleak situation could get any better in his mind.

ooooo

"HARRY!"

The young wizard grunted as a frantic cloud of bushy brown hair tackled him, hugging him tight around the middle. He flinched. "Ouch, my ribs—"

"Oh! I'm so sorry! Did I hurt you? Oh, I'm so stupid!" Harry shook his head and hugged her back, albeit with much less force.

"I'm okay, just a bit bruised, is all." Harry was almost weak-kneed by the time Hermione released him, her worried face blocking the view of the rest of the common room, which had fallen silent. He felt a firm thump on his back and guiltily looked into the freckled face of his best friend, forcing himself to pull off a convincing smile.

"You're all right!" Hermione nearly sobbed.

"You're fine, mate," Ron crookedly smiled. "Had us worried there for a second or two."

Harry swallowed, his throat suddenly cotton dry. "Yeah." He pathetically answered.

"Come on," Hermione urged, grabbing his hand and clearing a few fourth years with gossip rags off the couch with a glare. He fielded a few slaps on the back and welcome calls from his housemates, his stomach roiling with every step as they closed in on the sofa and sat, his best friends on either side of him. "How've you been? Where were you? What happened? I was afraid you'd miss your end of term exams!"

Harry snickered as Ron rolled his eyes. "Oh, that's just brilliant. Harry's gone missing and is possibly taken as You-Know-Who's prisoner, and you're worried he won't be able to tell the difference between fluxweed and hellebore!"

"Of course not, Ron," she scowled, Harry shaking his head at their antics. "Of course I was worried about you, Harry. You just disappeared without a word to anyone. Where'd you go? Why'd you go? What happened? When—"



"Oi, give him a break, Hermione," Ron hissed, glaring from around Harry. "He's just got in, for goodness' sake."

Hermione glared back but it softened the moment her gaze reached Harry. "Where were you?" She asked in an undertone, mindful of the meddlesome ears opened in their direction. "We were looking for you through the play, but by the fifth turn, McGonagall told us we'd better face front and watch the drama or she'd dock points and kick us out."

"We though you were in the back," Ron added, somewhat tense. "But it was so dark, we couldn't see you. Hermione wanted to go find you, but we were afraid of what McGonagall'd do if we moved. You know how she gets at the end of term. Crotchety old bag."

"Ron!"

"Well, she is!" He protested, rolling his eyes at the witch's disapproving look. "Well, we'd had about enough—the play was kind of boring anyway," Harry chuckled at Hermione's objecting murmurs, "so we were about to get up, McGonagall be damned, when right about the end of the play Gilliam bursts through the doors and says you and Ella and Kaltag have been captured. The entire Hall went up in panic and Mr. Smythe took off with Daedelus and Snape."

"It was awful," Hermione added, and Harry was overcome by the grief and fright lingering in her eyes. "We tried to follow them but Dumbledore wouldn't let us. He ordered everyone to go back to the dormitories and refused to let us help or anything. It was just awful." Harry squeezed her hand as she sniffed, taking out her wand and turning a nearby stray piece of parchment into a handkerchief.

"All we know is that McGonagall went to get the Aurors and you hadn't come back yet. By then, they'd shut us up in the dorms and had an Auror come in—Tonks—and tell us no one was coming in or going out except for the professors." Ron continued anxiously.

"The Aurors made it very clear that if anyone used magic or their forces to incapacitate them, they'd be expelled or worse, sent to Azkaban." Hermione pitched in.

"They didn't tell us anything except there was a Death Eater attack in Hogsmeade and some students were involved. We could see the smoke and fire from the tower." Ron ended, his voice bogged down with grief.

Hermione sniffled again, hiccupping rather loudly. "It was horrible, Harry: not knowing whether you were all right or not." Her lip trembled and Harry could see she was fighting to stay in control of her emotions. She sandwiched his hand between her own, her brown eyes holding his evenly. "You really scared me, Harry." Harry offered her an apologetic smile; though, he wasn't quite sure he pulled it off.

"Me too, mate." Ron awkwardly included, patting his back again. Harry gave him a smile as well, expressing his thanks at their concern.

"Nikola and Starbuck were going absolutely bonkers not knowing what was going on. She threatened to break down the walls and portrait if they didn't let her out," Hermione went on, shaking her head. "In the end, Starbuck had to put her to sleep."

"How'd he do that?" Harry finally asked.

"Telethargy," the bright witch replied. "He entered her mind and triggered sleep. But we were hearing all sorts of rumors," she fretfully continued. "That V-Voldemort and werewolves and vampires and trolls were present."

"And Hogsmeade, a magical village—destroyed!" Ron snorted. "You'd think they'd ward their shops against the possibility of fire!"

"Oh, Ron." Hermione scolded, giving him a withering look before she turned to Harry expectantly. "What happened, Harry? Were you hurt?"

"One question at a time, Hermione," Ron chided. "He's just come out of hospital, you know."

"It's all right, I'm okay," Harry repeated, throwing them a small smile. "Just bruised and banged up a bit."

"Why'd you go to Hogsmeade in the first place?" Questioned Hermione, a hint of disapproval in her tone.

"You know," Harry motioned to his scar and Hermione let loose a small gasp. "I ... had a vision. Voldemort and Mystikos were in the forest—"

"Mystikos?" Hermione breathed, shocked.

Harry nodded. "And a few Hybrids and Death Eaters and vampires—"

"Blimey, that was true?" Ron exclaimed with surprise. Several heads swiveled in their direction before Ron barked, "Don't you all have some exams to study for? Time's a-wastin'! Get back to work!" Many students grumbled and swore under their breaths at Ron, who turned to Harry with wide eyes as Hermione waved her wand to throw up a Privacy Charm. Ron seemed to wait for the bubble to materialize then fade out of sight before he blew up, "How the hell did they get so close to the school?"

Harry shrugged. "It was near the edge of the forest by the Shrieking Shack. I'd got a vision that they'd had Kaltag."

Ron rolled his eyes and sneered, "What was he doing there?"

Harry swallowed, biting his lip. "I think he had a date."

"In the Dark Forest?" Hermione asked skeptically.

"I dunno, I haven't spoken to him since then," he hastily added. Which was the truth: after that Golradir had taken over, but Harry wasn't about to get into that. "I met Ella on the front stairs and told her to get help, but she insisted she come along."

"Typical." Ron snorted. Harry avoided his gaze.

"I had to reveal my elemental power to her," he whispered, leaning their heads close. "The front gates were locked. But anyway, we got to the forest, led by Argentum, and confronted them. Mystikos wanted to take Kaltag away and his vampires were intimidating enough, telling me and Ella how good we'd taste and all sorts of nasty things."

"Disgusting."

"You should've seen what they turned into when they were angry," Harry added. "Terrible sight, those two."

"Two?" Hermione choked.

Harry nodded. "They said they were the leaders of some clans: Lamia and Moussaka, or some other."

Hermione's eyes brightened. "The Lamiai and Empousai clans? They've sided with Voldemort?"

"I guess. We didn't talk much as she was trying to kill me."

"She?" Ron prompted.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Jojo and Mona or something. I wasn't really paying attention."

The redheaded prefect's face lit up. "Said nasty things, you say? What kinds of things?"

"Ronald!"

Harry laughed at Hermione's indignation. "Sorry Ron, nothing that bears repeating." The keeper's face fell. "And Voldemort, ugh, you should've seen him. He's been drinking Hybrid blood for the last few months." Hermione perked, her interest peaked. "He looks an absolute mess."

"As opposed to before?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You remember that Hybrid from the Hollows?" He waited for their nods. "He looks much uglier than that." He laughed at their dually disgusted faces.

"So that's it?" Hermione dug, giving him a skeptical look. "What happened after you found them?"

Harry swallowed, suddenly nervous. "Er, no. Um, Voldemort wanted me to tell him about the prophecy—"

"Oh, no!"

"But I didn't get the chance. Kaltag kept interrupting him and telling me not to say anything. But then..." Harry paused, desperately trying to keep his breathing even. How could he explain the rest of it to them without explaining Kaltag's part? If he'd left it at that, Hermione would have immediately got that bookish look in her eyes and she'd figure out that someone had to have killed all the Death Eaters. He'd be cutting it close.

"What?" Ron pushed. "Did that prat trick You-Know-Who and heroically save the day?" He spat mockingly.

"N-no," Harry shook his head with trepidation. "Everything happened so fast," which wasn't a total mistruth. "It was one big bloody mess. One minute, spells are flying and the next, a vampire, a Hybrid and three Death Eaters are dead. And Kenward," he tacked on, feeling a heavy pull in his chest at his friends' shocked expressions.

"No." Hermione breathed. "He's dead?"

"You don't know?" Harry frowned when they shook their heads. "Yeah. I didn't see when he arrived, just when he died." Harry quietly replied, fiddling with a loose string on his shirt.

"Oh, my." Hermione breathlessly reacted, a new wave of sniffles overcoming her.

"Blimey," Ron muttered, shaking his head. "Kenward's dead?"

"Along with the Lestrangle brothers and some other bloke, yeah," Harry nodded, blinking away the image of Kenward sprawled on the ground, his eyes vacant, dead. It wasn't any easier, he realized, seeing someone die in front of him. "We honestly didn't expect him to survive through the year? The position's cursed, after all." He shrugged at Hermione's displeased look.

The brown-haired witch sagged into the couch, wiping the kerchief over her rubbed-red nose. "That's it, then."

"What are you going on about?"

Hermione turned to the boys with an obvious look. "With Kenward dead, there's no one left to find the Child of Phoenix." Harry exhaled shakily, twisting the thread frantically between his fingers. Could he do it? Could he keep this from Hermione and Ron? Would he be able to live with himself? Was he up to keeping this secret from his best friends?

"Actually..." Ron and Hermione's heads swerved at the sound of his soft voice, surprising even himself. "... I ... I think the Child of Phoenix was there ... last night." Harry briefly shut his eyes at the look Hermione and Ron exchanged.

"What do you mean 'you think'?"

"You ... you saw them?" Hermione's low voice was shaking with barely contained excitement.

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Or her," the brown-eyed witch indignantly corrected. "It could be a girl." Ron rolled his eyes.

"I didn't get a good look at him ... or her," Harry hurried to misleadingly clarify. "It was dark and everything was so fast, I... The next thing I remember is being held back and nearly getting my head lopped off by a Hybrid. Then I spotted Bellatrix escaping with Voldemort and Mystikos and I chased after them."

"Harry." Hermione reproached, though there was no real feeling behind it, he could tell.

"We got to the edge of Hogsmeade and they Apparated. That's when I noticed the fire, and Snape and Daedalus arrived. We practically had to be carried to the Infirmary, we were so beat up. Kaltag was in a bad way ... Mystikos did something to him, I dunno. Didn't see him in hospital when I left." He muttered at the end, feigning lack of interest. He inwardly sighed as Hermione and Ron fell silent.

He'd done it. He'd kept Kaltag's secret. Their secret. They were none the wiser and he didn't have the urge to tell them about Ella and Golradir. He did it. Why, then, did he feel like he'd just swallowed a ton of bricks?

When the pair remained silent for an unusual amount of time, Harry decided to brave a look in their direction. He was startled to note they were staring at him. "What?"

"You never saw their face, not once?" Hermione goaded.

"Not once." Harry fibbed, staring at his hands. He watched as Hermione sat back into the chair, her eyes glittering. Of course, she had to be working things out in her mind. Harry sighed nervously, pretending to feel his bandages beneath his shirt.

"If you never saw them," Hermione calmly rationalized, "then that could only mean one thing." Harry forced himself not to swallow when her dark eyes speared his reprovingly.

Harry bit his lip, forcing a laugh. "And what's that?"

Hermione's brow formed a crease. "The Child of Phoenix is dead."

Ron's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "How d'you figure that?"

Yes, Harry inwardly incited. How do you figure that?

"Well it's obvious, isn't it?"

"Uh, no." Ron cynically replied. "Obviously not."

Hermione huffed, giving the keeper a testy look before she began, Harry hanging on to every word of her explanation. "Harry said Kenward was there, but he didn't know when he'd arrived, but saw when he died. So, who else could it have been? Not Harry nor Kaltag or Ella could have killed Death Eaters, Hybrids and vampires single-handedly; and Voldemort and Mystikos are the only ones strong enough to kill him, so ... it makes sense that Kenward is the Child of Phoenix." She finished with an eager grin, which then turned into a frown. "Well, he was."

Harry resisted the urge to give a short whoop of relief. The suspicion was shifted off of him and Kaltag and Ella. Hopefully with Hermione's logic, they both would put it all to rest. "I guess that's possible," Ron uneasily agreed. "But then, why would he throw

suspicion off himself? You said it yourself, Harry, he told you he wasn't the Child."

He immediately noticed the reflective glimmer in Hermione's brown eyes. "He did tell you that didn't he?" Harry cursed their outstanding memory. Any other time he'd welcome their intuitiveness, but certainly not today, not in this situation. He shrugged noncommittally.

"He could've lied," Harry answered, making sure to glance at each of them in turn. "He lied about having the Sword, didn't he?"

"Well, technically, he didn't lie—"

"Maybe he was doing it to protect himself."

"Fat lot of help that was," Ron grumbled. "Still got himself killed in the end. Although..." Ron pursed his lips, thoughtful. "Don't you find it odd that he died so easily? I mean, this amazing-spectacular-stupendous legendary warrior for all things Light, Good and puppies kicks the bucket through a measly Killing Curse? Pfft. Not that spectacular, if you ask me..."

"Ron!"

"Don't you find it the least bit strange?" He reasoned. "Honestly, if the guy's some celebrated warrior spoke about like a savior, a Killing Curse, no matter how powerful, shouldn't've been a match for him."

Hermione bit her lip. "Well, there are always extenuating circumstances."

"Yeah, like the fact that he possibly faked the entire thing—"

"Can we please," Harry raised his voice, effectively cutting off their argument, "stop theorizing conspiracies? At least until I've ... grasped everything."

He felt a hand on his shoulder, followed by Hermione's sympathetic reply of, "Oh, Harry. We completely forgot: it must have been incredibly awful for you to have seen all that."

Harry nodded, desperate to get them off the subject of the Child of Phoenix before they started ticking everyone present in the clearing



off. "Now whether he lied or not, the fact still remains the same: Kenward's gone, along with any possibility of finding the Child. I think we ought to leave it at that."

He waited for their nods of approval. They didn't look too thrilled to let the subject drop, but did so for his sake. Harry decided it was for the best; in time, maybe, when they'd resolved the whole Golradir disaster, he'd tell Ron and Hermione the truth. He only hoped that they would be able to forgive his deception. He strongly doubted they'd be as understanding, but for now, he was willing to lie even to himself to get the peace he so desperately yearned for.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of warning looks from Ella and apprehensive glances from his best friends. Word of their Hogsmeade venture spread like wildfire throughout the school, but none of what he'd heard had been remotely close to what happened. Many tried to prod him and Ella for information, but they remained tightlipped. As for Kaltagonus, since no one could find or corner him long enough, the students of Hogwarts were left to let their imaginations run wild.

The noticeable absence of Kaltag had troubled Harry a bit. While many students were passing on that he'd been locked away in the infirmary due to a deadly case of dragon pox, Harry knew the boy wasn't there. His cot was empty the morning he and Ella were sent back to the tower, but strangely enough, no one seemed to recall having seen him, not in class and not in school.

Rumors were flying that he'd been taken home or to a specialist for facial disfigurement. Harry's instantly thought of Spiridon locking a resistant redhead away in a cage and sending him off, keeping all of his misdeeds safe, but Nikola and Starbuck were adamant that their father hadn't withdrawn the prefect. Although, not even they were certain about Kaltag's condition, which left Nikola in a very foul mood.

The announcement of Kenward's death was met with strangled cries of grief and sad faces. Harry felt a lump in his throat every time he passed by the locked Defense room, a sign nailed to the door stating the cessation of all Defense classes. He found himself fingering Amenophus, which he now carried with him in his pocket, seeking its comforting warmth and magic to ease his remorse.

Needless to say, with all the excitement and grief, end of the year exams were hard for anyone (except Hermione, of course) to concentrate on. And it hadn't helped any that Snape was docking points left and right before their Potions exam for seemingly no reason. Every time he looked at Harry, five more points were taken.

At long last, the Leaving Feast was upon them and Harry found himself waiting for the Celestials to arrive once more. Harry rolled his eyes at the number of girls already bawling into their robes at the prospect of leaving.

"Ridiculous," Ron had said as they watched Lavender and Parvati dab their puffy eyes with tissue. "What are they always crying about anyway?" Harry shrugged, stating that he'd rather not analyze the female mind before dinner; the solutions he came up with were bound to earn him several blows from Hermione alone.

The Hogwarts students were almost all seated when the Celestials began to arrive. He'd heard they'd been told to wear their traditional house robes tonight, to which the Beings groaned. Harry completely understood: gone were their bright-colored cloaks and uniforms identical to Hogwarts' own.

Tonight, the students were dressed in simple white chitons and leaf circlets of gold on their heads. The boys had some sort of cape with their house color and the border on the Entities' dresses mimicked their house. They looked as if they'd jumped straight out of a history book; the boys didn't look too thrilled as they took their seats, grumbling amongst themselves.

"Had I been told sooner," Icarus started as he dropped on the other side of Harry, nabbing a biscuit, "I would've shaved my legs."

"I feel a breeze," Yorick idly stated, oblivious to the disgusted faces made around him.

"Oh, come on, Kaenslar!" Icarus cried, throwing his biscuit down. "I'm eating!"

"Have you seen Kaltag?" Harry thought to ask.

"What? No," Icarus' twisted face held carefully masked concern. "Not since the play."

Harry's eyes were glued to the front doors, waiting for any sign of red hair and blue eyes. He knew Kaltag had been avoiding him all this week; hiding out who knows where, probably smart enough to know that Harry was waiting up for him so he hadn't slept in the dorms all week. Unfortunately, there was no sign of him.

As the rest of the Celestials filed in, some jumping over to their friends' tables—mostly girls, Harry noted—to prattle about their clothing, Harry resigned himself to deeming that Kaltag wouldn't show up. McGonagall was already asking students to return to their own house tables. "Hey," Harry grunted in annoyance as Ron leaned over his lap to question Icarus. "What's with the dresses and capes? Is there another Halloween Ball after this that I don't know about?"

"They're called chitons, you jackass."

Everyone's heads shot up in surprise as a familiar voice answered. Harry felt his heart pound and his stomach twist itself into knots at the sight of Kaltagonus. Little of his color had returned to his cheeks and he was strangely sedate, save for the slight look of irritation on his face. Harry could see the edge of a gauze pad on his neck where the vampires' bites were peeking beneath the dark blue himation covering it from view.

Really, no one would have noticed much of a difference in the way Kaltag held himself and appeared, but Harry knew something was definitely off: by the looks of it, Kaltag's eyes were once again dilated, just as they had been when Spiridon had spelled him. His eyes fell to the silver band shining beneath the floating candles and the stars on the enchanted ceiling, wrapped tight around the redhead's wrist. It may have been a trick of the light, but Harry thought the runes were faintly glowing.

He regarded Ron with his usual look of disdain before he sat across from Hermione and Nikola, not once looking in Harry's direction as he turned to the head table for Dumbledore's announcement. "If he's going to say such stupid things, you had best keep a lid on your culturally-challenged boyfriend, Granger."

Several quiet giggles burst from the Gryffindor girls as both Ron and Hermione blushed, though for different reasons. She muttered a

response vaguely close to 'he isn't my boyfriend,' but either no one heard or they just didn't believe her.

"Well," Kaltag's tone sounded louder than expected with all Paradors staring at him expectantly. "Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

"Welcome ... back?" Icarus hazarded uncertainly. Kaltag simply inclined his head, his eyes not moving from the professors' table. Harry was somewhat disappointed as he acted as if everything that had happened that week, hadn't: as if it were just a nightmare to be brushed off. Harry didn't know whether to feel upset or worried.

"How are you feeling?" Hermione, ever the mother hen, broached.

Harry narrowed his eyes as Kaltag raised and dropped a shoulder listlessly. "Fine."

"I see your mouth's still working fine. Shame." Ron groused, scowling at him from across their plates.

The Being turned his dilated eyes in the prefect's direction, mocking him with a grin. "The same goes for you, too: shame your stupidity hasn't broken, but then I guess you're a lost cause."

"Why you—!"

"Well, you're in a foul mood today," Nikola pointed out, her brow furrowed. "What's twisted your chiton?"

But Kaltag never got the chance to answer as Dumbledore stood to make his annual end of the year speech. His blue eyes twinkled so brightly, Harry was sure anyone from any seat in the Great Hall would be able to see it.

"Astonishing, how time flies. It seems as if it were only yesterday we were extending these vast arms of Hogwarts to our brothers and sisters of Aripedes, uniting the two great schools once divided. Throughout the year, I have watched you all befriend one another, despite your differences. Some of you surprised even yourselves, never anticipating that you would become closer than friends, but soon finding loyal sisters and brothers in each other."

Harry's head snapped quickly to Dumbledore and he stared at the headmaster wide-eyed, but Dumbledore was smiling to the room at large. He couldn't possibly have known ... could he? Spiridon had assured him he hadn't, but then again, what good was the word of a professed liar? He chanced a glance at Ella down the table, but she, too, was avoiding his gaze. Harry directed his sight back to the aged wizard at the front, not daring to look at Kaltag for fear of being overtaken by memories of the past week.

"And here we are now," he smiled warmly at the students' faces staring back him, "At the end of another remarkable year, ready to depart into a world as vague and perplexing as life's complex journey. There will be difficulties ahead for a number of you, I assure you," his tone turned serious and the twinkle in his steady gaze dimmed. "And you have seen how dangerous this war truly is; we are all affected by it, whether directly or indirectly. You will all be faced with grim choices, and my only hope is that when the opportunity arrives, you make the right ones.

"For Aripedes, you have been a delight to accommodate; my only regret is that this year has gone by much quicker than anticipated, but the bonds we have made are strong and unbreakable." Dumbledore's eyes seemed to scan each Celestial in the Hall. "I find that goodbyes are usually declarations of grim finality, so instead, I will say this: no matter the need, students and staff of Aripedes, you will always be welcomed with open arms and hearts here. If need be, Hogwarts is willing to be your second home in these dark and dangerous times, a beacon of light in the darkness.

"So I will not say goodbye," Dumbledore shook his head slowly, his long white beard catching on the buttons of his yellow robes, "but fare thee well, and good luck. I will not say goodbye, but welcome. It has been an honor to house not only Celestials, but family. So come, let us raise our glasses in salute. A toast to new beginnings, a toast to new alliances, a toast to remembering our loved ones, both blood related and non-blood related in times so dark; a toast to our brethren of Aripedes."

Everyone grabbed a goblet now topped with pumpkin juice and raised their cups, declaring in unison, "To Aripedes!"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily as he declared with great relish, "a toast to new beginnings; to family."

And for the briefest second, Harry braved a glance in Kaltag's direction, not expecting much from the passive Being in return. He was startled, however, to meet blue eyes across the table, regarding him closely across the gleaming dinnerware of Hogwarts School. Their eyes remained lock on each other's as goblets clinked and the rest of the hall rang out in enthusiastic accord, "To family!"

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Morning dawned rather bleak and early on Hogwarts School. Harry was awoken by the sounds of his dorm mates frantically storming around the room and throwing their things in their trunks at the last minute. Neville was asking everyone if they'd spotted his toad, Trevor; Yorick was asking everyone to search their clothes for his green pants, to which Seamus gagged in response, saying that he'd burn his things if Yorick's underpants were found anywhere near them.

Harry clambered out of bed and got dressed, joining the frenzy in jumping around the dormitory to find things that were missing and last seen on the first day of term. When at last he found all of his things—Vernon's hideous purple socks, his photo album, and his copy of Quidditch Through the Ages—Harry hauled his trunk and Hedwig's cage down to the common room, dragged them through the castle and outside to the carriages that awaited them.

The courtyard was littered with carriages—and droppings—pulled by thestrals and griffins, both creatures separated, of course, or they'd never make it home, with professors reminding students if they valued their limbs, they were not to provoke the griffins. He immediately spotted Ron, towering over everyone else around him in a small huddle of Celestials and wizards he recognized as his soon-to-be former housemates. Ginny was the first one to spot him, throwing him a bright smile and holding up a brass owl cage. "Look, Harry! I've got my own owl!"

Harry set his trunk down and set Hedwig's atop it, staring back at the blinking, red-feathered owl. "He needed a good home," Starbuck piped in, poking his fingers between the bars to pet Mercury. "I wasn't planning on keeping him forever. At least he can fit in with the Weasleys now." Ginny grinned widely, hopping on the balls of her feet and dashing off to tell Luna. Ron merely rolled his eyes and

shook his head, scolding his own tiny owl for bouncing back and forth around his cage in excitement.

Harry briskly nodded, scanning the group for the elusive redhead. Sighing in exasperation, he asked, "What's up with Kaltag?"

As expected, Ron made a face and smacked his lips in displeasure. "He's all broody," Nikola answered, her face a mixture of annoyance and concern. "I tried getting in bed with him—"

"What?" Ron exclaimed in alarm.

"Oh, nothing like that, you pervert! When we were younger, every time one of us was upset, we'd stay in bed with them as long as it took to make them feel better." Her hint of a smile fell and she stared at her nails and scuffed the toe of her trainer in the grass. "He refused me access. That's not like him. Not like him at all." Her eyes narrowed and Harry could see how worried she was about Kaltagonus. His insides coiled in sympathy.

"Where is he now?"

Nikola nodded behind him, to the Black Lake. "Over there. I hope he's tossing in the last of his Sickles and Knuts to wish for a better mood." She breathed angrily through her nose and in anger, bent one of the handles on a carriage door.

By that time, Harry had already excused himself and walked down the grassy knoll to the lake, his apprehension overcoming his concern. His anxiety increased tenfold at the sight of Kaltagonus by himself, as silent as everything was hectic on the other side of the field sitting a safe distance from the bank, staring out over the still waters. As Harry neared he could see a bare patch of lawn in front of the Being's crossed legs, the blades of plucked grass sitting in a pile beside his knee. Swallowing past the lump in his throat, Harry gathered up all of his Gryffindor courage and set down the mildly steep decline.

"Stay where you are, Harry," the soft warning voice froze Harry in his tracks and he found himself staring at Kaltag's back apprehensively. The Celestial yanked another blade of grass from his designated gathering place, flicking it to the growing mound at his knee. "For your own safety."

Harry's fingers twitched, all alarms going off in his head and yelling at him to obey, to scramble back up the hill and have his wand in hand should the Bellotaur try something. Instead, he scowled at his overactive conscience and plodded the rest of the way down, choosing to stand beside the forward-facing Celestial. "I don't care." Harry shrugged, crossing his arms.

He could see the Being's cheeks rise slightly in a smile. "Ah, reckless youth. It's refreshing to see that it hasn't been lost on this generation."

"How'd you know it was me?" Harry thought to ask, wary of the very Golradir-like symptoms the redhead was displaying.

"I could smell your pity from here, Potter," the Being drawled, tugging on a handful of grass. "And it reeks. If you expect me to break down and sob on your shoulder while you stroke my hair and hold my hand..." Kaltag snorted contemptuously, "...well, you'll forgive me if I pass."

The green-eyed wizard raised his hands miming surrender. "By all means: feel free not to."

"Good. You wouldn't be able to handle it, anyway."

Harry felt righteous indignation spread through him, but he remained silent. Kaltag sniffed loudly and shook his head. "God, you'd think they don't know what soap and water was!" he jerked his head back toward the number of students milling on the front lawn. "And I could practically hear the blood rushing through your body." He added in a gruff undertone. Harry's fists tightened and he watched the languid Being from the corner of his eye. "You're nervous. I don't blame you. I would be, too, if I'd been through what you went through. I'm shocked that you even mustered the courage to come here."

Harry thought he saw the fin of a merman or woman ripple just under the lake's surface. "What? I can't see my brother off?" He idly commented. He dropped his gaze to Kaltag, who looked up at him. His eyes may have been brighter than a five-year-old's at Christmas, but they were also emptier than Harry had ever seen them, not to mention his pupils were unnaturally wide again. Nevertheless,



Kaltag's eyes flashed briefly at Harry's words before they turned blank.

"So ... you do know."

"Yeah. I know."

"How?"

Harry found he really didn't know the answer to that. How much could he tell Kaltag that Spiridon would deem fit? But at the mere thought of the General, Harry's sympathies shut down. "Take a wild guess." He returned, displeasure lacing his tone.

It took Kaltagonus a moment to ponder his words but soon his face softened in realization and he sneered. "Ah. Dear old dad? Wonder what his part was in all of this."

Harry's brow creased and he decided to take a chance and drop down on the lawn beside Kaltag. "Don't you remember anything?"

Kaltag shrugged, twisting a long piece of grass around his finger. Harry could see a bit of the silver band cutting into his wrist beneath the cuff of his sweater. "It's kind of fuzzy. I just remember Voldemort laying into me, then after that, seeing you and Ella tied to the trees. The rest is a bit broken, but I'm sure somewhere in there that I killed a few people."

The latter was said dryly, but Harry noticed the change in Kaltag's demeanor. He trembled, only slightly, and his eyes became more blue than black. Obviously he remembered some of the more gruesome aspects of that night and was affected deeply by it.

"You didn't kill anyone. Golradir did." Harry pointed out. There was a difference, and Kaltag had to know that. It wasn't his fault.

The redhead scoffed angrily. "Oh, G—he did. Right. And who is he, Harry?" Annoyed blue eyes pinned him to the spot as Kaltag sighed sharply and stared over the water. "I killed five people that night and caused the death of our own professor. I have to live with that for the rest of my life." He shook his head furiously, his face screwing up in resentment. "I'm no better than Voldemort."

Harry head rose sharply at that. "No. Don't you say that—you're ten times the person he is!"

"Harry, be realistic—"

"I am!" Harry snapped at the Being's skepticism. "You are not Voldemort. You didn't kill those Death Eaters or that Vampire and certainly not Kenward," he listed, his eyes narrowed in anger. "Golradir did. You didn't have a choice: you were being controlled by him."

Kaltag twitched slightly at the mention of the Bellotaur, much like wizards did at Voldemort's name. Harry found it odd that, like the wizards and witches, Kaltag couldn't even say the name of his biggest fear. "No, Harry. It was my hand, my mouth, my body that did it. Go ... he can only take so much credit."

"Fear of a name," Harry wistfully began, holding Kaltag's gaze, "increases fear of the thing itself. Dumbledore told me that."

"Mm." Kaltag cynically nodded. "Dumbledore also give you advice on how to deal with treacherous fathers and serial killer split personalities?" Harry frowned, remaining silent. "I'll take that as a 'no'."

He shook his head at Harry's silence, his eyes dim and voice quiet. "It was me. I said those things and swung that sword and-and laughed when I did it. All of those people—dead, and ... all the Herald cares about is that I'm dating a witch." He paused, scoffing loudly and yanking on more handfuls of grass. "Was dating a witch."

The Gryffindor glanced up sharply from restoring the mutilated lawn. "What?"

"Yep," Kaltag brusquely replied, uprooting a large bit of grass and root. "Our ten-minute relationship is officially over."

"Wha...she dumped you?" When she was so desperate to save him that night that she nearly cost them their lives? What was she playing at?

Kaltag shook his head. "I broke it off with her. I needed some time to ... whatever." The Celestial sighed wanly and his shoulders drooped.

"Anyway, if we'd stayed together, who knows what we would do? I can't control him." Harry nodded. Perhaps it was for the best. "She understands completely, said it was a good idea. We both have other things we need to be focusing on than some grade school long-distance fluff-fest. There's no time in our lives for scented love letters and flowers and blown kisses and sappy 'miss you-love ya-ring me ups'. A one-night stand, maybe..."

Harry snorted, shaking his head incredulously. "Besides, nothing kills a relationship faster than attempted murder."

Harry rolled his eyes at the Being's thinly veiled seriousness. "She does like you." Harry somewhat optimistically added, hoping to boost morale in the glum prefect.

"Well, she should get over us; it would only cause her more misery in the future."

The wizard felt uneasiness return, his nerves edgy and on alert. "Us?" He carefully brought up, his hand twitching in awareness. It was the second time in the last minute that Kaltag had referred to him and the Bellotaur as a single being. As the ginger-haired Being narrowed his eyes at him, Harry could've sworn a yellow flash flickered to life in his eyes before Kaltag clenched his fists and it died, his eyes blank once more.

Harry regarded the tight smile with some misgiving. "Sorry. It's harder to focus when I've not spelled myself in a while."

"Spelled?"

"Daedelus. He gave me a spell to block him, albeit temporarily. Passed on to him by Spiridon." The redhead gave a grunt of annoyance and he picked at the grass furiously. "Wish there was a spell to block him."

Harry chuckled darkly. "Yeah. Tell me about it."

"He can't expect me to go back to Themys, not after all he's done."

"Man's a nasty piece of work. You know he tried to threaten me not to—"

Harry tried to speak, but something stopped him. His voice was cut off and his tongue suddenly stopped obeying his command to speak, as well as his jaw that had squeezed itself shut. The air from his lungs was gone in one fell swoop and the taste of burnt rubber glided over his tongue as a reminder. He couldn't tell Kaltag. He wasn't supposed to tell Kaltag. He can't know everything.

Harry blinked past the tears in his eyes and swallowed, calmly reassuring whatever hold the General had on him that he wasn't going to say a word. "Harry?" Kaltag's voice broke the haze around his mind. "Harry, you all right?"

Swallowing a gulp of air and the rubbery flavor on his tongue, Harry forced himself to nod, replying with an evasive, "Fine."

"You sure? You don't look fine to me."

"I'm okay," he waved the boy's concern away. "What was I saying?"

"Spiridon. He threatened you?" Kaltag's voice was cold fury.

Harry turned away, staring at the tentacle that suddenly appeared to snatch a duck off the lake's surface and drag it to the depths. He suddenly felt like that duck: helpless; powerless; prey. "Uh, I didn't mean threaten, really..."

"I wouldn't put it past the idiot." Kaltag grumbled, looking at Harry anxiously.

"He just—he cornered me," Harry faltered through, "afterward to ... well, he didn't ... he didn't want me making it ... known about our rather ... unique situation," he formed with care, "without your ... permission?" He finished weakly, but loosed a sigh of relief after Kaltag's thoughtful expression eased.

"How do we explain our 'unique' situation to anyone?" Kaltag mused, twisting a blade of grass between his thumb and forefinger.

Truth be told, Harry didn't want to explain it to anyone, least of all his friends. At least not until he himself came to terms with it. Which would probably take, at best, a few years; no sense in rushing it, right?

"Judging by the reactions I got last night, I'd say you haven't told Ron and Hermione."

"Not without your permission." Harry quickly replied to Kaltag's furtive glance. "It is up to you."

The Celestial simply shrugged in reply, focusing on the lawn as his expression became downcast. "Go ahead," he allowed, much to Harry's disappointment. "Though, good luck trying to explain everything. But I'm not about to get in the way of your friendship with Ron and Hermione; I don't want to be blamed for you keeping secrets from them."

Harry nodded, the guilt settling like a cold ball of dread in the pit of his stomach. "Right." He pathetically answered, his features marred with self-reproach.

Kaltag scoffed, flicking his fingers at a nearby dandelion that somehow was spared from his destruction. "God knows Weasley would jump at the chance to discredit me."

"You know, you could try being nicer to him." Harry sharply suggested.

"And why would I want to do that?"

Harry sighed exasperatedly, rolling his eyes. "Never mind."

The silence stretched between them, marred only by the sporadic waves made by the Giant Squid and the constant babble of the students over the hill. "Promise me something." Kaltag's words were quiet, but still firm. Harry turned to look at him, but Kaltag was looking away.

"Okay."

"I want it made known that even though we are..." Kaltag pulled a face and gestured awkwardly between them. "...whatever we are."

"Brothers." Harry confidently answered. Kaltag swallowed and glanced at Harry's trainers, obviously uncomfortable.

"I want it made known," he said again, albeit more indecisively than he had started, "I'm still the cute one."

Harry couldn't help the snort that escaped him. Kaltag was smirking at his shoes. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," Harry replied, sweeping his fingers through his hair. "And I think your mirror's cracked." He laughed again as Kaltag elbowed him and grumbled under his breath, though a smile could be seen slipping through the cracks of his scowl.

"Well," the ginger-haired Being sniffed, scratching at the dressing on his neck. "We'd better get going. The carriages leave in a few minutes and if I don't leave soon, I'm bound to pick off every blade of grass on the grounds." He stood to his feet with a nervous laugh, brushing the dirt off his clothes and pulling out his wand.

Harry followed him up and eyed the patch of shorn grass with a raised eyebrow. Shoots suddenly sprouted from the ground to replace the earth the Celestial had destroyed. The Gryffindor glanced at Kaltag with a small grin as the boy chuckled, his eyes briefly lighting up in true amusement. "Nobody likes a show-off, Potter." Harry rolled his eyes, wondering if the Being ever took his own advice. "But that does remind me: practice makes ... well, in your case, not quite perfect."

"Oh, ha ha." Harry sarcastically replied.

"Though it is strong, relying just on your elemental ability won't be enough." Kaltag informed, his tone authoritative and lecturing. "Use your wand, your agility, but most importantly," Harry tensed as the redhead tapped his wand on his temple, "use your mind. Sometimes your best defense is common sense."

Harry nodded, all joking aside and shoved his hands in his pockets as an awkward silence befell them. He was immediately reminded of one of the original reasons he had come here, warm and more than likely glowing against his fingers. "Oh!" He exclaimed, fumbling to pull the gemstone necklace from his pockets. Harry held the chain out, dangling the golden jewel before Kaltag's eyes. "This is yours now, I suppose."

Only Kaltag shook his head and pushed it back toward Harry. He didn't miss the spark of gold that momentarily overtook his eyes.

Stepping back from the Gryffindor and gripping his wand tightly, he said, "Keep it. I've already got my hands full with the Evilstone Scepter. But if I'm in need of a weapon of death, you'll be the first person I call."

"Heh, thanks." Harry saw the macabre joke for what it was, but was hit with another moment of inspiration. Hastily shoving Amenophus back in his pockets, he hurriedly began searching the pockets of his robe and jeans, making a triumphant noise when he pulled out a worn slip of parchment with doodles on the front of it. "Have you got a quill?"

Kaltag threw him a bemused look and shook his head. "No, but will a pencil do?" Harry nodded and accepted the proffered item, scribbling down a bunch of numbers next to a crude drawing of Trelawney. He handed both the parchment and pencil back to the Celestial. The redhead glanced down at them, his face scrunching slightly in puzzlement.

"You ... uh, well I know your home is Muggle-like and all, but you're not staying there," Harry hastily added, "so wherever you go ... if you want..."

"Ring you up?"

Harry jerkily nodded. He waited until Kaltag finished his scrutiny of the paper and slowly nodded, letting out the breath he'd been holding. "Yeah, I supposed that's ... yeah." Kaltag finished lamely, shoving them both in his back pocket.

Nodding as well, Harry motioned his head to the crowd near the front entrance. "I guess that's it, then."

"I guess." Kaltag dully answered, tapping his wand against his thigh. Harry made a jerky movement with his head and started back up the hill. Halfway up he noticed he was the only one moving, Kaltagonus choosing to stay on the lake's edge, looking in his direction but not at him.

Harry faltered in his next step and gestured behind him to the sound of chatter. "You coming?"

The redhead nodded once, his grip on his wand noticeably tightening. "In a bit. I just need to..." He nodded to himself, frowning.

Harry returned the gesture with a bemused, "All right," and set back up the hill to his friends.

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A/N: Secondary title taken from William Ernest Henley's poem Invictus. One chapter left! (does happy dance) Let me know what you think!



## Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Messenger (aka, Bloody, But Unbowed, Part III)

By the time he'd reached the courtyard Hermione had arrived and was speaking animatedly to Nikola, Selene, and Ginny, but she turned to greet him the minute he'd appeared.

"Harry, there you are! I've been looking all over for you, thought you'd slept in. Are you all right? You look a bit peaky; maybe you should rest—"

"I'm fine, Hermione." He reassured, pushing her hand away from his forehead. She gave him a skeptical look but nodded at his healthy pallor.

Several minutes passed, which Harry spent glancing over his shoulder toward the Black Lake or telling his Paraffin housemates goodbye, before Kaltag finally appeared over the hill, still looking glum but unwearied. Harry watched as he stopped to congratulate Gilliam on his new job as flying instructor at Aripedes ("I had to take it," Gilliam shrewdly expressed, smirking. "Someone's got to look after you, you know.") and dispatched a run-in with Pansy Parkinson ("Watch it, Smythe!" She had yelled, to which Kaltag crudely replied, "Watch your own furry ass, Pekingese.").

"I see you're in a better mood." Nikola deprecatingly said.

"Ah, what can I say?" The Being shrugged. "Air-travel makes me grouchy."

"As opposed to what?" Ron grumbled beneath his breath.

"I can cure that," Selene brashly replied, startling Harry as she draped an arm around his shoulder and tugged on his ear with a grin. "You, me, and Harry still have time for a quick one-off in the broom closet. And Ron, too, if he wants." Hermione's eyes widened before she settled for an appalled look; Ron looked as if he was seriously considering the offer.

Selene wiggled her eyebrows at Harry's nervous look and he felt hot around the ears and collar as she dropped a kiss to his cheek. "C'mon: I'll get a firstie to distract the teachers. Whaddya say, Harry m'boy? Fray in the hay? Rut in the hut? A whack in the—"

"Ahem!" Hermione interrupted, looking decidedly as discomfited as Harry felt.

He was saved by Ginny's highly amused laugh as she locked elbows with Selene and began to tow her away. "I'm gonna miss this. We need to exchange contacts, you and I..."

An embarrassed tinge brought color to Harry's face as Hermione asked after a short pause, taking calming breaths to lose the red in her cheeks, "She wasn't serious, was she?" By the looks of things, Ron appeared to have desperately hoped she was.

They all seemed to settle at Kaltag's chuckle. "Who, Selene?" He inquired, furtively glancing in her direction. "I dunno. Maybe I should go check. Oi, lck! Toss me a rubber!"

"Kaltag!"

"Joking." He mimed submission to the put out witch and Entity.

They all turned round when Thetis announced the carriages for Olympus would be taking off in five minutes. Particularly somber, Harry said his goodbyes to Starbuck and Nikola, blushing even more when he received kisses from both her and a broad-grinned Circe (he'd sworn he turned the color of Ron's hair when she promised to look in on his love life from time to time) and turned to watch a teary-eyed Hermione bid farewell to Kaltag.

"Ohh," she wretchedly moaned, her arms wrapped tightly around his neck. "I'm going to miss having you in class. It was refreshing to have a challenge for a change."

The Being chuckled, returning the embrace full-force. "Who knows: I may yet have a reason to come back," he cast a fleeting look at Harry as he said this, a slight upturn to his lips. His eyes were vacant and lackluster again and Harry realized he'd stayed back at the lake to spell himself.

Ron tensed at Harry's side, seemingly seething in silence as the Being couldn't help but throw a last parting shot: he kissed Hermione's cheek and winked over her shoulder sticking his tongue

out at the furious Ron. "You know, I just might come back here to see you, Hermione."

"I hope so!"

"How could I resist such a tender little morsel?"

Harry's smile was all but wiped off his face at the whispered endearment. Without a second thought, his hand was on his wand, curling around the handle, ready to be whipped out and used. Maybe this hadn't been a good idea, maybe he should've told Ron and Hermione, then he would've had help ... damn it, how could Golradir have returned? Didn't Kaltag use the spell right?

But it turned out Harry's inward panicking was all for naught. Kaltag was very much Kaltag, still as empty-eyed and quiet as he had been a minute ago, only this time there was a spark of mischief in his eyes. "Oh, I hadn't noticed," Hermione had pulled back from the embrace, staring at the Being with a smile. Still, Ron fumed quietly on. The Celestial's brow rose. "Your eyes: they're different. Well, they're ... brighter, at least." Hermione nervously chuckled. "Something good happen?"

A brief glance from Kaltag was all it took for Harry to drop his hand and abandon his defensive stance. Kaltag answered with a bland smile. "You could say that." The two parted with warm smiles as Starbuck and Nikola disappeared into a nearby griffin-led carriage with Icarus and Selene. Kaltag walked toward them, bypassing Harry and Ron, throwing the scowling prefect a fractious glare.

"I'd shake your hand Weasley, but you haven't been properly vaccinated." He drawled stonily. "No clue what I'd catch."

Harry rolled his eyes and Hermione muttered something under her breath about boys. Ron narrowed his eyes, his face in ugly splotches of red and pink. "Surely not humility. Take care ... Taggy."

The Being's indignant scowl was priceless.

To avoid an argument—and from the dark looks exchanged, a fistfight—Harry jumped in with a pointed, "Goodbye, Kaltagonus." Hermione had seized Ron by the arm and dragged him off, lecturing

him all the way to their trunks as Ron continued to throw the Being dirty looks.

"That boy will never learn, will he?" Kaltagonus derisively shook his head. Harry scoffed and stared after his friends. "I guess this is it."

Harry frowned, staring at the polished wood of the carriage. It somehow felt short, too short, that he hadn't spent a lot of time with Kaltag. That despite the entire year they'd spent talking and practicing and getting on, it felt like they were meeting for the first time all over again. As if they hadn't known each other and were now just discovering one another; he felt cheated. He wanted more time.

"Did you mean that?" He suddenly asked. "Will you come for a visit?"

Kaltag looked surprised at Harry's question and shrugged. "I can try. Maybe make up an excuse to visit. I'm sure Spiridon has one or two up his sleeve," he bitterly replied.

"How about the summer?"

"Isn't Hogwarts closed for the summer?" Kaltag teased.

"My Aunt and Uncle's house isn't," Harry brought up, discounting how the Dursleys would react to having Kaltag drop by. It would undoubtedly be a comical experience, to say the least.

Again, Kaltag shrugged, unsure. "Not sure. This is the first free summer I'll have, not locked up in an office at Smythe Enterprises. But if I can, I won't let you know." He impishly smiled. "Just leave it as a surprise."

Harry's brow furrowed, startled. "Well, that's ... rude."

The redhead rolled his eyes skyward. "Incredibly! That's why I'm doing it."

Harry smiled at the genuine cheekiness shown by Kaltagonus. James' cheek, he thought. He was definitely going to miss this. As if he'd heard his thoughts, Kaltag's blank eyes conveyed a vague sadness that darkened his gaze.

"Hey," Harry prompted, drawing his attention. Suddenly, Harry felt uncomfortable under his scrutiny. After all, he hadn't been well versed in the art of the encouraging speech, especially to long-lost family members. "Um ... take care of yourself. And fight like hell." He added in an undertone.

His words generated the desired flicker of life in the Being's eyes. "If you're going to start bawling into my jumper, I'm leaving. It's rather expensive, and I quite like it, thank you." He sneered, his face becoming serious as the professors parted to their respective schools and Thetis began her countdown to takeoff. With a slight nod, Kaltag gripped Harry's hand tightly, firmly shaking it.

"Goodbye, Harry Potter."

And suddenly, Harry was certain he had done this some time before, but he couldn't remember when or where. He just knew it was familiar, and right. They broke off and Kaltag quickly climbed into the carriage with his friends and family, shutting the door as Harry hurried off to the side with his friends to wave them goodbye.

With a loud proclamation from Chiron, the griffins lined up behind each other and circled around, the young Celestials' faces pressed against the windows of their carriages, hands waving feverishly at their friends as they headed down the lane to Hogsmeade. Harry, Ron and Hermione watched as each carriage took to the skies one by one, flying away gracefully, or as graceful as a hulking mass of wood, metal and animal could get. They glided through the clouds before becoming a spot in the sky, finally moving so fast they became a blur, rippling from sight.

"And there goes the most interesting year we'll ever have at Hogwarts." Ginny miserably stated after the last carriage left.

"I doubt it." Hermione replied, checking on Crookshanks as the Hogwarts carriages pulled round.

"Unless you're planning on kidnapping a dragon and coach it on how to teach Defense, I doubt it." Ginny smartly replied, hauling her trunk and new owl with her.

The ride to Hogsmeade Station was somewhat more crowded than normal as a handful of London-bound Celestials elected to ride the Express home than take the long way around. As soon as they had unloaded their things, Hermione reminded him that she and Ron had to meet in the prefect's carriage first and so they left Harry and Ginny to look for a compartment.

After passing several overstuffed or reserved compartments, a harassed Ginny and a frowning Harry spotted an empty one surprisingly not too far from the front. Harry hoisted his trunk on the luggage rack, helping Ginny as she set hers up and slumped in his chair for the long ride home. He wasn't looking forward to talking much, especially after the week he'd had, and stared out of the window instead, watching the steam from the train float by.

"Come in, Neville," he heard Ginny welcome, followed by the thud of the round-faced boy's trunk. "We've got plenty of room, of course. No, you won't be a bother. Oh, hello, Luna. Of course you can join us, right Harry?"

"Hiya, Neville, Luna." He drearily replied, looking out the window.

"Forgive Harry," Ginny roguishly explained. "He gets really tetchy if he's been away from chocolate or Quidditch long enough. You should see him during the summer. The scourge of house elves, he is."

"No," Harry glowered at her teasing smile. "Come in. I won't bite. I hope."

"Hello, Harry," Luna glided into the compartment and settled in the seat across from him, Quibbler in hand. "You look as if you've lost something. Did someone take your things, too?" Harry stared into her protuberant eyes and shook his head. "Oh. Maybe you're being controlled by something else. I thought I sensed a wrackspurt in here."

Harry gave her a strange look as the train roared to life, sending Neville sprawling into the seat beside Harry, Trevor the frog landing atop Harry's head. "Sorry, Harry. I was just—"

"No need to explain, Neville." Harry quietly interrupted, handing the discouraged amphibian back to Neville, then staring at the passing

ruins of Hogsmeade. Harry felt his insides twist as the steam engine gathered speed and the small village went by in a blur of black and brown, no doubt leaving all of the students with a depressing last memory.

"Awful," Neville spoke up. "My gran sent me an owl after she'd seen the Prophet. I don't think she'll ever let me go to Hogsmeade again. Said it was too dangerous."

"Mm-hm," Luna dreamily put in, only her blonde head visible over the edge of The Quibbler. "Especially with all of those hauges and snobblefloats running amok."

"Well, I don't think anyone will be going on any Hogsmeade visits anytime soon," Ginny added, sighing dreadfully at the demolished Honeyduke's. "I expect it was You-Know-Who's plan all along." Harry perked at her grim tone, eyeing her solemn face. "To destroy us through the annihilation of chocolate: Destroy the sugar, destroy the world."

She grinned happily at Harry's snort of amusement. Neville chuckled and clutched the dejected-looking Trevor close as Luna turned the page of her copy of The Quibbler, a faraway smile on her face.

The rest of the journey crawled by, the four of them chatting about the past year, their plans for summer, and Harry and Neville swinging by Dean and Seamus' carriage for a quick hello. They jumped up to lighten their money pouches when the witch with the food trolley rattled past and weighed themselves down with cakes and candies.

Most of the ride went without incident, save for Michael Corner stopping by to remind Ginny of something. That visit consisted of the two of them chatting briefly while Arthur Gilliam sneered at Harry and the wild-eyed Slytherin Archibald Wickham scowled, grumping at the Ravenclaw to hurry it up. As dusk stretched across the daylight sky, Hermione and Ron showed up, the former looking flustered and carrying dozens of scrolls in her arms, all covered in her neat, small handwriting.

"The prefect's meeting was unexpectedly lengthy," she explained, settling in the seat between Luna and Ginny as she balanced her

armful. "I thought I'd never be able to keep up with everything. I hope I wrote everything down." She worriedly began sorting her rolls.

"God forbid you missed something, I'm sure it's covered in your back-up notes." Ron dryly replied as he sat on the other side of Neville, returning her indignant look.

"Wouldn't've killed you to have taken some notes."

"I think you took enough for the entire prefect department."

"Are you ever going to learn some responsibility?"

"Sure. Are you ever going to quit badgering me to learn some?"

"And are you two ever going to lay off?" Harry cut in, glaring between them. "Why don't you go patrol the corridors and take the hint when you see two people snogging, yeah?" He rolled his eyes at their embarrassed looks and stared back out the window. Wisely, the rest of them kept silent, focusing on different parts of the carriage—or in Luna's case, disinterestedly reading *The Quibbler*—and willing the burn in their cheeks away.

Following the awkward silence, Ginny drummed her fingers on the seat and smacked her lips audibly. "Okay," she stretched out. "Awkward. Anyway, I'm off to visit Michael. Come on, Luna."

Her mortified brother instantly straightened and he narrowed his eyes as she stood, sliding the door open to let Luna wander out first. "Are you still dating him?" He demanded, his brow creased and his stance conveying his eagerness to hunt down the Ravenclaw and size him up.

He relaxed however, when Ginny scoffed and rolled her eyes. "No way," she snickered. "He owes me some serious Galleon from the last Quidditch match bet." She smirked and stepped out the door, nearly running into someone. "Oh, sorry. Hi, Ella! Bye, Ella!"

"Erm, yeah, hi—bye, Ginny," the red-haired witch looked on in amusement as Ginny dashed out of sight. "Oh hello, Hermione, Neville, Harry..." she greeted, a half-smile on her face. Harry regarded her with a reproofing look as she turned to Ron and hesitated, her fingers stiffening on the compartment door. "...Ron."



"Hello Ella," Hermione greeted cheerfully, pushing her scrolls aside to make room for the witch. "Did you want to sit down?" She glanced at Ron's encouraging nod and Harry's critical stare and seemed to shut down right before their eyes.

"Uh, no, I just—wrong compartment, I ... nice to see you," she hastily dithered, backing away from their booth.

"No, stay," Ron called out as he pulled out a pumpkin pasty. "You're not bothering us. We were about to recap this year. Wicked, yeah?"

Harry cast the barest of patient stares at her and threw in, "Yeah, Ella. Sit. Stay. Talk." He brushed off her stern look. "I'm sure Ron would love to hear anything you have to say, or tell him. Wouldn't you, Ron? You'd love to listen to what she's got to say. We've got nothing to hide from each other."

The deadly look the ginger-haired witch was spearing him with had little effect. Harry simply crossed his arms and silently goaded her into confessing, ignoring the strange looks he was getting from his friends.

"Uh, sure." Ron bewilderedly answered, glancing at Harry with an odd expression.

Ella merely pursed her lips and, staring at Harry, curtly replied, "No thanks. Whatever I have to say isn't nearly as important as anything the Great Harry Potter has to confess. Goodbye." With that, she slammed the compartment door shut, her scowl matching Harry's furious look.

"Um..." Ron began after an edgy pause. "There something you want to tell us, mate?"

"Bad break-up?" Neville pitched, pausing as his forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "I didn't even know you two were dating."

"We're not—we weren't," Harry amended, standing from his seat and heading for the door. "I'll be right back." Whatever protests or questions Ron and Hermione had were silenced with the closing of the door. Staring down the corridor, Harry saw Ella's bright red hair disappearing into the next car. "Ella!" He called out, disregarding the

blur of scandalized faces as he passed by. "Oi! I know you can hear me! EL—oof!"

Harry grunted as he plowed into someone coming out of a booth. "Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean ... ah."

"Chasing after your girlfriend, Harry?" Cho brushed herself off with a feeble chuckle, accepting Harry's offered hand to help her up. Harry gave her a smile that came out as more of a wince. "I'm kidding." She added at his dubious look, laughing that halfhearted laugh again.

Harry shook his head, catching sight of Marietta Edgecombe in Cho's carriage along with few other Ravenclaw girls. The word 'SNEAK' in pustules across her cheek was considerably smaller than the beginning of the year but no less noticeable. It was times like these that Harry thoroughly appreciated Hermione's intelligence and fierce duty to loyalty.

"No," he quickly replied, starting back down the corridor. Ella's bright red hair could be seen two cars down and moving quickly. "Just—well, you know, Gryffindor stuff—"

"Well, since you're in a hurry, I just wanted to apologize," Cho hurriedly stated, stopping Harry in his tracks. He couldn't remember anything that she had done recently to make amends for, but she had his attention.

"Oh?"

The Asian witch nodded, wringing her fingers in her long dark braid. "Yeah, for just ... not being a good girlfriend," as Harry shook his head she hastily replied, "It was too soon for me to get involved after Cedric, and I took everything out on you. I'm sorry."

Harry nodded, a clear acceptance of her apology and replied, "I could've been more understanding myself, I guess."

"You tried," she smiled, not as bright as she did before the Triwizard tragedy, but it was a much bigger smile than he'd seen on her face in over a year. "I'm beginning to get over him, Cedric," she quietly admitted.

"That's fantastic." Harry replied, only grimacing as he realized how callous it must've sounded. But Cho simply nodded, her fingers now fiddling with the knitting of her jumper.

"I realized it's high time, you know; wouldn't be fair to anyone else I might date in the future." That statement brought Harry to the realization that this was indeed Cho's final year at Hogwarts. "Well, yeah, that's all I wanted to tell you ... really. Sorry for keeping you."

"Oh. Yeah," Harry remembered Ella and he glanced back to see her hair in the distance. His brow creasing in thought for what to say next, Harry settled for, "Uh—thanks, Cho. Best of luck to you."

The dark-haired Ravenclaw nodded with a content grin settling on her face as she moved to reenter her carriage holding the nosy-looking witches. "You too, Harry." They parted amicably, Cho sliding back into her compartment with her housemates unabashedly firing off questions and Harry sprinting down the corridor to keep up with Ella. When he reached her she was nearing the penultimate car, her stride long and determined, just like Ron's was when he stalked away in rage.

"Ella, wait. Ella! I'm not stupid, you know, I know you can hear me! Ella!" Harry swayed with the train and grabbed hold of her arm, yanking her back. She angrily spun around, her hair whipping Harry in the face, and she tried to rip her arm out of his grasp.

"Let me go!" Harry ignored her and tried to keep hold of her robes.

"No! Would you stop and listen—to—me?"

"No, Potter! Not after that stunt you pulled—let go!"

"Not until you listen to me!"

"You have nothing to say that I want to hear," she snapped, delivering stinging slaps to Harry's grappling hands and wrenching each of her wrists from his clutch. "So leave me alone!"

"No!" Harry growled through gritted teeth, aware of the curious peeps they were getting through several doors and windows. "Not until we discuss this!"

"There's nothing to discuss!"

"You had a chance to tell him!" Harry hissed, tossing her hair out of his face. Ella spun around to glare at him and fix the bandage on her arm.

"And so did you," she retorted, her eyes furious orbs of glittering brown. "And by the looks of things, your booth was still intact, so you didn't, either."

Harry opened his mouth to snarl back an answer but the blinking eyes peering at them through blinds and window edges caught his attention. Swallowing his words and smoothing his robes he suggested in an undertone, "There's bound to be an empty compartment somewhere. We'll talk there; not in the open, not like this."

Sweeping her hair over her shoulder, Ella seethed through clenched teeth, "There's nothing to discuss. I thought you understood that."

"He was right there," Harry fumed, his hands balling into fists. "You could have told him."

"Right." Ella laughed scornfully, scowling at a prying fourth year. "And I'm sure you would have dropped your news the moment I dropped mine."

Feeling the heat rise to his face, Harry began, "I—"

"What is all the fuss out here about? Oh, of course: Potter." Harry rolled his eyes at the familiar drawl of Draco Malfoy, spotting his white-blond hair approaching with his two thugs from the corner of his eye. "Can't enjoy a decent trip back without half-blood scum mucking it up."

Both Gryffindors turned to the Slytherins and spat, "Piss off, Malfoy!"

"Look, I told you before that it's different with me."

"Ha! That's a laugh." Ella scathed.

"Ella!"

"Could you half-bloods take your lover's spat somewhere else?" Malfoy was behind them now, a smirk spread across his pointy face. "Air your dirty laundry for someone that cares." For all the objections Malfoy was making about not being interested in their argument, he looked quite comfortable propped under a lamp, arms crossed and a sneer on his face. Crabbe and Goyle hovered nearby, dumbly guffawing.

As Ella threw a rude hand gesture at the boys, Harry scowled. "Sod off, Malfoy! Don't you have second years that need terrorizing? Go away!"

"Excuse me, Potter, but as a prefect—"

"Do I look like I care?" Harry snidely butt in, throwing the pale boy a dirty look. Harry turned back to Ella, not waiting for an answer.

The witch glared coolly at him, her hand on the doorknob, her lips a thin, angry line. "If you were half the hero I thought you were, you would have told them by now." She quietly but firmly stated, her insult like a slap to Harry's face. "I have nothing to say to you. Goodbye."

"Potter!"

Audibly groaning, Harry pulled at his hair, dying to hex Malfoy and be done with it and implored, "Ella! Would you please just—"

BOOM!

Without warning, the train gave a violent lurch, hurling everyone to the right side. Harry flew into the nearest door, his head smashing against the glass, causing a large splinter to form. He crumpled to his knees, his vision hazy with white spots dancing before his eyes as he unsteadily felt for something to stabilize him.

Several loud cries and groans were heard rising up from every booth of the steam engine, ringing in Harry's fogged up brain. He groaned, pressing the heel of his palm to his head and trying to clear his vision, glad the loud buzzing in his ears had stopped. When Harry blinked his eyes again, he realized he had lost his glasses at some point and began feeling the floor around him as he pulled out his wand.

"Harry." He heard Ella's throaty call, and saw a large red blur in front of him. His world suddenly cleared as the cold metal of his glasses settled on his face and Ella came into view. She looked disheveled and a small trickle of blood ran down her face, but at least she looked all right.

"What—what was that?" He coughed, stumbling as the train ground to a rickety halt. He caught Ella as she pitched forward and anchored both of them on a lamp. "The train's stopped. What happened?"

"I—"

CRASH!

They seized the lamp tightly as another jolt rocked the train, a new series of confused wails, shouts and cries mounting from the students in the surrounding carriages. "What the hell is going on?" He heard Malfoy shout to his clueless bodyguards. Blinking back the pounding headache that blossomed in his head, Harry frantically raked over the train as he embraced Ella tightly, his breath coming out in short, flustered pants.

As his eyes scanned the last cars, he noticed smoke billowing down one corridor, lighting up with bright colors. He could see many students pouring out of their cabins and down the corridor, looks of sheer terror on their faces. That could only mean one thing.

Harry's heart dropped. "Voldemort," he gasped, pushing both him and Ella to stand. "Voldemort's attacking the train!"

"What?" Ella sharply said, but whatever else she was about to say was cut off by the flurry of screaming students breaking through the doors and flooding the corridor, tripping over their robes and viciously pushing each other out of the way in an effort to escape.

"What's going on?" Harry yelled as they shoved past him and Ella, the wild panic present in their eyes. "What's happening?" He tried to stop one of them but they clawed at his hands until he was forced to let go. He grabbed another, pulling a frightened third year to his face. "What's happening?"

"YOU-KNOW-WHO!" She cried, tears streaming down her drained of color face. "HE'S HERE! HE'S ON THE TRAIN! HE'S ATTACKING! HE'S HERE!"

Harry's gut twisted into knots as the girl hysterically jostled him away and followed the rest of the crowd. Voldemort was here. How was that possible? Driving the logic to the back of his mind, Harry raised his wand and began pushing against the crowd, through them to the back of the train toward the brightly lit smoke.

"Harry!" He heard Ella yell for him.

"Round up the others!" He shouted back, struggling against the out of control students trying to escape. "There's no time to waste, Voldemort..."

Harry froze as he heard several curses and spells fired, followed by loud cries and crashes. "I know that voice," he hoarsely stated as the students drove them farther apart. His eyes quickly snapped up, meeting Ella's as he heard the incantation for the Bat-Bogey Hex roared. "That's Ginny!"

"Oh my God!" Ella didn't blink twice before diving into the throng, shoving bodies to one side as she fought to get to the next car. Harry yelled after her, trailing her cleared path as they entered the mass panic of the next railcar, but Ella didn't acknowledge him. As they neared the ruckus the smoke was thicker, blocking their view until Ella thought to shout a Clarity Charm. "Ginny!" She cried out, stumbling over fallen students sobbing on the floor. "GINNY!"

Harry caught up with Ella and pulled her back, twisting around to hiss at her, "Stay back! If it's Voldemort—"

"I don't care! Ginny's in there!"

Harry didn't have time to argue as his heart thudded painfully in his chest. By the time they'd reached, the duel seemed to have ended, a sinister silence had settled over the car. With his wand out and his senses on high alert, Harry inched toward the compartment overrun with smoke and feathers, horrified at the sickly greenish shade tinting them.

Ella whimpered and tried to rush past him, but Harry barred her, failing to swallow past the lump in his throat as he held his wand steady. They silently agreed to enter the compartment together, ducking low to avoid any surprises. "On three," Harry murmured, the sound of his blood still rushing past his ears. "One, two, thr—"

Before they could move, a few figures stumbled out, coughing hard and crashing into the wall. The first half of the Stunning Spell was out of Harry's mouth before Ella lunged forward and gathered someone in her arms, breathing out a relieved "Ginny! Oh my God, Ginny! You're hurt!"

"No, I'm fine, it's—it's not my blood, it's..."

And she was indeed practically steeped in dark scarlet blood. Harry sighed, relieved that Ginny still standing. A number of scratches could be seen on her arms and she sported a bloody lip and a gash on her cheek, but she was no worse for the wear, despite being covered in blood. She seemed confused that Ella was hugging her tightly, but said nothing.

Harry moved to inspect the others, hoping none of them happened to be Death Eaters and was surprised to find Luna, dusting herself off and clutching a burnt Quibbler in one hand and her wand in the other. Her large gray eyes landed on Harry and she wordlessly nodded, not saying anything.

"Voldemort?" He softly muttered.

"No," Harry whipped his wand around but lowered it as he recognized Arthur Gilliam beneath the light soot. The Being coughed and inclined his head toward the compartment. "Death Eater."

"Harry!" The wizard whirled around at the sound of Hermione's distressed call, spotting Ron and several others he recognized as prefects and D.A. members trailing behind them.

"Ginny! You're bleeding!" Harry eyed Ron grabbing up the youngest Weasley and pumping her with questions. His eyes momentarily strayed to Ella, who suddenly appeared by his side, avoiding them.

"What's going on?" He asked Gilliam, forcing down the urge to lash out at the redhead. "Did you say a Death Eater was here?"



"Is," Gill spluttered, limping toward them with wand in hand. "He's—he's still in there, restrained."

"How ... Harry, don't!" Harry darted into the room, wand raised high as he ignored Hermione's objections, feeling her and Ron and Ella jump in behind him. The sight that greeted him reminded him uncomfortably of Golradir's doings in the clearing, only far, far worse. "Oh, no."

There were signs of a duel. Scorch marks from thrown spells crisscrossed the walls, trunks appeared to have been blasted apart, their contents strewn everywhere and the upholstery was shredded, the feathers and cotton still drifting in the air. The compartment was in shambles, the windows broken and the lamp dripping oil and wax on the floor. But the state of the booth was the least of their worries.

A number of those he both knew and didn't know were draped in abnormal positions on top and beneath the wreckage, clearly injured, or in most cases, dead. Two unknown seventh years, one Ravenclaw and another Gryffindor, lay with their bodies at odd angles; another, a Hufflepuff, was half hanging out the shattered window, the sickly glow of the Dark Mark lighting up the window and casting the room in green shadow.

The worse yet was Corbin McCullen, a seventh year Gryffindor Harry remembered had tried out for beater last year, sat propped in a corner, the rest of his limbs thrown about the room, having sprayed blood all over the walls and door. Harry stalled the urge to be sick, disgusted that anyone could be merciless enough to do that. "Hacking Hex," Gilliam dourly informed. "I heard the commotion and came in time to hear it. That was right before Corner went down."

"Oh, no." Hermione breathed again, pointing her wand at one of the figures covered with debris. "Michael." Beneath the splinters of wood and blood and feathers, indeed it was Michael Corner, his eyes open and expressionless.

Ella stooped and placed her fingers against his neck, shaking her head. A sob bubbled up from Hermione's throat and Harry let Ron take care of her, too numb himself to offer comfort. Ella shifted cushions and parts of trunks off of the rest of the bodies, a witch and

a wizard, and checked them for life. She met Harry's expectant look and nodded grimly. "Barely. They need medical aid right away."

"We've got to get them out of here," Hermione insisted, seeming to have composed herself and wiping her eyes on her sleeves, still looking at Michael. "We can't waste time if they have a chance."

Harry's eyes scanned the destruction and narrowed into slits. He felt the air leave his lungs and anger and hatred bubble up in him as he spotted the smirking perpetrator, laughing madly at their grim faces. He recognized the fanatical, manic Slytherin, Archibald Wickham, chuckling elatedly to himself, his arms wrapped around him in a straightjacket fashion in a thick length of rope. Harry greatly wished he could wipe that triumphant smile off his face, by any means necessary.

"Half-bloods, Mudbloods, tick-tick-tock," he huskily crooned. "All your time is short on the Dark Lord's clock." He gruffly chuckled, his feral eyes gleaming with mirth. Harry's jaw tightened as well as the hand around his wand, the tip sparking up in his anger.

When Wickham met his livid gaze, his cracked lips widened in a fierce leer and he fidgeted against his bonds. "You'll see, Potter. Your hourglass has run out of sand," he harshly growled, the manic grin never wavering. "Your time has come, Harry Potter. Heh," he wheezed out a chuckle and resumed his mad rocking. "This is just the beginning, you'll see, Potter."

Harry's whole body vibrated with fury, his hands shaking and his mind firing off spells that would make the boy suffer. He flinched when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, and he stared into the grave eyes of Harvey Fitzharding, the Head Boy. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave, Potter, and anyone else that isn't a prefect," he announced to the car at large. "Weasley and Granger, you stay and disperse the crowd, as you're practically seventh years. Old prefects, come on, we need to make sure he hasn't got a wand hidden somewhere..."

Harry stared at him for a spell before throwing a glare over his shoulder at the sneering Slytherin. A quick glance was exchanged between him and his very pale best friends, and Harry nodded, mutely conveying that he would look after Ron's sister. With a last glance at the grisly disaster, Harry followed Ella out into the crowd of

prefects and rubbernecking students that gathered at the door, fear and curiosity scrawled on their faces.

He spotted Ginny, looking rather drowned in blood, shivering under Dean Thomas' long arms. Luna stood by her, still clutching the charred edition of the Quibbler as Harry approached, the crowd parting for both he and Ella. Ginny's large eyes leveled with his, and Harry's throat went unexpectedly dry. Her look was grim, pessimistic, and somber. "Michael's dead, isn't he?" Her tone was as lifeless and bleak as the bodies scattered in Wickham's compartment.

Harry nodded, feeling his stomach clench at the gasps and murmurs that started to spread through the train. He was grateful for when the food trolley witch arrived as well as the conductor's assistant, both informing them that the proper authorities had been contacted and that there was nothing more to see. Ron and Hermione started shooing the meddlesome students away, threatening them with detentions and points losses for the new term if they didn't dissolve quickly enough.

"Get moving, Potter." Harry scowled at the blond Slytherin who waved them to the next car. He was mildly surprised that Malfoy hadn't said anything with a mocking sneer or wasn't laughing at what had happened; instead, his expression was unreadable but his eyes were gleaming.

The move back was sluggish and quiet and Harry expected some were too distraught to gossip. The corridors were filled with the Head Boy's barked orders and the prefects' firm requests that they disband as they were getting ready to transport Wickham.

"How far are we from the platform?" He heard someone ask.

"Ten minutes, one of the prefects said."

"Blimey ... what'll they tell the parents?"

"Your kid's dead', I expect."

Harry thought the answer was obvious, but this definitely wasn't a good time to be discussing such things. He rolled his eyes and glared at the fifth years snarling, "Tactful. Very tactful." They jumped

at the sound of his voice and quickly turned red with shame. "Instead of yawping, why don't you just—"

"GET DOWN!"

Harry spun around with his wand out as the students reacted with cries and dropped to the floor. Alarmed, he noticed that Wickham had somehow broken free of his restraints, wand in hand and facing the corridor, the Dark Mark burned blacker than sin in his left forearm, and his wand pointed straight at a petrified Mandy Brocklehurst.

As the Head Boy fumbled with his wand, he screamed, "DOWN!" again, but the Hufflepuff was too scared to move. Without thinking, Harry leapt over the bodies of students, urging his legs to go faster toward the terrified witch and lunging for her as soon as the spell left Wickham's mouth.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The jet of green light hurtling in her direction barely missed her head by centimeters as Harry tackled her from behind. He heard the spell obliterate the door of the next car, showering glass and wood over all the students.

Undaunted, Harry whipped out his wand and aimed a sharp, "Expelliarmus!" at Wickham, feeling a sense of grim satisfaction as the Slytherin's wand shot into the air and landed next to him while Wickham was sent flying into the ceiling. He landed with a sickening 'crack', lying in a motionless heap on the floor. The Head Boy and Girl, adults and quick-thinking prefects each threw their own Binding Spells at the Death Eater, thick ropes shooting from the ends of their wands to tie him up from head to toe. Unfortunately, none of the ropes seemed to be a gag.

"Half-bloods! Mudbloods! Blood-traitors! You'll all suffer! The Dark Lord will have you! You'll die like the dogs you are! Just you wait, Potter!" Wickham was ranting, squirming on his back like a worm, frothing at the mouth. He leapt off the floor like a fish out of water, his crazy eyes scanning the crowd before they found Harry. "You can't win, Potter! The Dark Lord will be victorious! The Dark Lord will kill you! This isn't over, Potter! It's just the beginning, you hear me? You've barely even touched the surface! This is just the beginning!"

Finally, Hermione had enough sense to Stun the raving Slytherin silent, her face red in anger. Harry meant to stand up and help her, but the conductor for the Express suddenly appeared, a rather thin, scrawny-looking man that reminded Harry strongly of Stan Shunpike of the Knight Bus, and ordered everyone to the front cars, fitting as many in them as possible. Throwing his bushy-haired friend what he hoped was a reassuring look, Harry gathered up Wickham's wand, handed it to one of the elder Gryffindor prefects and followed Ginny's advance guard to the front cars, the sorrow giving way to exhaustion.

He felt deadened, numb, and uncomfortably unsafe as he passed the cars with students locked in and peeping through the blinds. How many were there like Wickham? How many had slipped through the cracks? How many were just about to? He remembered the many times where he was quite suddenly faced with the realization that this war was indeed real: news articles on deaths, riots, raids and whatnot had given him pause at mealtimes and he would grimly scan the editorial and stew on it for a few hours before something new and different and normal caught his attention. Harry had seen his fair share of tragedy (his life was even considered one by many): Cedric, for one, his mother's memories and Golradir's tantrum another, but now ... it just seemed too real.

He knew Voldemort had to have been recruiting followers. There were even days when he joked with Ron that Malfoy and the entire Slytherin lot were all Death Eaters-in-training. But to actually see one without seeing them, a training Death Eater blindly devoted to Voldemort: in their school, eating with them, sharing classes with them, sitting among them...

It all made Harry feel incredibly defenseless. And he could do nothing about it because it was accusations like those that drove the desperate, susceptible ones straight into Voldemort's camp. He could do nothing, not point fingers, not suggest, and certainly not start pulling up everyone's left sleeves, and that's what frightened Harry the most.

A hand on his arm brought him back to the present, staring into bright hazel eyes and a pretty face. "You saved my life," Mandy gasped, her eyes watery. Harry didn't know what to say, as it had been the truth. "Me. A nobody. A stupid nobody who was too scared

to duck." She berated, running a hand nervously through her disheveled hair.

"You're not a nobody," Harry softly argued. Harry swore he heard Lavender Brown swoon from somewhere out of his peripheral vision. "You panicked. It's reasonable."

"But you didn't, you just jumped in and nearly took the Killing Curse for me!" Mandy maintained, a look of grateful admiration washing over her face. "You're really brave. I'll never be able to thank you enough, Harry." She sniffled and Harry desperately hoped she wouldn't burst into tears as he didn't need more attention right now.

So he was pleasantly surprised when she gave him an appreciative smile and pecked him on the cheek, quietly thanking him again before Lavender and Lisa Turpin from Ravenclaw dragged the trembling witch—who nervously glanced back at Harry periodically—off to get some of the free chocolate the food cart witch was shoveling out. He was glad that's she'd left when she had, otherwise she probably would've giggled at the pink spreading across his face.

He returned to his compartment toward the front, now occupied with what looked like every fifth and sixth year from Gryffindor packed in and Luna, who was slouched in a corner paging through her charred periodical. Dean was offering Ginny his tin of chocolate frogs, urging her to eat at least one more, just one more, and if he said that one more time, Harry was going to shove the entire tin down his throat. Hedwig, Mercury and Pig were squawking and twittering loudly in their cages, as tentative questions were thrown Ginny's way, but the youngest Weasley didn't seem to be in the mood for answering them.

"Back off," Dean defensively stated, his arm tightening around her shoulder, glaring at Parvati for even opening her mouth. "You wouldn't be in the mood to talk either if you'd seen people blown up!"

"Yeah, very subtle, Dean." Vicky Frobisher wryly stated, throwing the tall boy a dark look.

"Lay off," Seamus jumped to his best friend's defense. "He's just trying to help."

"And he's doing a fantastic job of it."

"Just one more chocolate frog, Gin, please?"

"Can't you see she's had enough?"

"Leave him alone!"

"Bugger off!"

Everyone was startled silent as red sparks ignited in the air and Ella scowled at them all. "I want everyone," she slowly and deliberately began, "who wasn't in this compartment when the train left Hogwarts ... to get out."

Naturally, of course, the Gryffindors tried to object, but the red-haired witch was having none of it. "I said everyone," she raised her voice over the protests, "who was not in this booth, when the train left Hogsmeade Station, had better clear off before I give you something to whine about. If you're not gone by the time I open my eyes, the Weasleys' pranks will pale in comparison by the time I finish with you. One..."

She didn't have to say any more; by the time she mentioned Fred and George, the Gryffindors had scrambled, darting in every direction and shutting the door behind them. Harry locked the door and pulled the blinds, sinking into the seat across from Ginny. Ella took the seat beside her and pulled off her robe, soaking it with a quick Water Charm and began to clean the blood off of Ginny. Neville and Harry exchanged concerned looks as Ginny remained silent, never looking up from her blood-encrusted hands. Luna briefly glanced up from her magazine and returned to it without a word spoken. Harry could see she had some blood on her as well, but it didn't seem to faze her.

"There was a lot of it," Harry snapped out of his haze, facing Ginny as she quietly spoke. "Blood, I mean. It was ... everywhere." She shook her head as if to clear it, grimacing at her thoughts. Ella continued to silently dab the blood off her face.

"Try not to think about it." Ella encouraged. Harry couldn't muster the energy to glare her into confessing.

"I only went in to ask Michael to pay up. I didn't expect to see him murdered, and God, that awful laugh of his. He ... thought it was all

... a joke. Like some sick game." Ginny freed a sharp sigh and put her head in her hands. "Merlin! If this is war..."

The three Gryffindors shared grave looks over the chaser's bowed head and wisely kept quiet.

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By the time the Hogwarts Express sputtered to life again it was completely black outside. Neville had mentioned it being later than half nine, several hours later than when they were due to arrive. Harry was sure his Uncle Vernon was turning an ugly shade of violet from being forced to wait for him. Assuming, of course, he hadn't already left.

When it was announced that they reached Platform 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, for the first time ever Harry was glad he'd be going back to the Dursleys. At least there, he wouldn't be constantly reminded of what had happened today, and his family's badgering was sure to keep his mind off of things.

As they gathered their things, Harry spotted armed wizards sweeping down the corridors, peering into their newly unlocked compartment. A gaunt Auror with beady eyes let them sternly know they could leave. They quickly filed into the hall, where Harry was sure he heard Dumbledore and McGonagall's voices echoing down the hall, followed the other frantic students desperate to leave, and were met with the large crowd of milling parents, looks of fright and anxiety ground into their faces.

Many squeezed their children gratefully upon seeing them, and Harry dolefully became conscious of the fact that some of those parents would never be able to humiliate or embrace their kids again.

As he guided Ginny to the familiar red heads of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley halfway into the crowd, Harry noticed many curious eyes slid in his direction, all of which seemed to be drawn to his scar. He self-consciously combed his hair over the mark, nearly dropping Hedwig's cage in the process, but it didn't stop them from looking.

"Oh, Ginny! Oh, dear, you're hurt! Oh, Merlin!" Mrs. Weasley fussed as soon as Ginny was at arm's length. The young witch put up a weak struggle as her parents fretted over her and Harry took the



free chance to scan the horde of waiting parents. Several Order members were dotted around the perimeter: Mad-Eye, he spotted Tonks' bubblegum-pink hair, and Kingsley glaring dome, those of whom he recognized, before he was suddenly engulfed into a pair of squashing arms.

"Harry, dear! Thank goodness you're safe! Are you hurt? Are you sure? You'd better not be lying to me! I'll take your word for it—where are Ron and Hermione? Oh, dear, they haven't been told much, we were here before the Order started crossing the barrier and we still don't know..." Mrs. Weasley feverishly recounted as she studied each of them closely.

"Harry." Mr. Weasley grimly greeted him, his arms clinging to his daughter so tightly Harry was afraid the unhurt Ginny would get hurt. He was suddenly aware that he had come with Ginny alone, Neville having gone off with his fearful grandmother and Luna's father, a preoccupied-looking fellow, collected her and disappeared.

As he looked to the barrier where several families were hastily beginning to take their leave, he caught Ella's eye as she was about to pass through. He frowned, turning to the Weasleys fussing over Ginny, and shook his head disappointedly. She could've told them; she should've told them, especially after nearly losing Ginny tonight. With a displeased frown he watched her flee through the barrier with the same hard-faced people he remembered that accompanied her to Diagon Alley last August.

"Oh! Ron! Ron, Hermione!" Mrs. Weasley yelled for them, gesturing madly so they would be able to spot her. An ashen Ron and Hermione dragged their trunks and animals over to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley where they were greeting with warm hugs and words of relief. Not even Ron had the heart to complain.

After being thoroughly questioned by Mrs. Weasley on her physical state and promised that she was unharmed, just shaken, Hermione hugged her again and threw her arms around Harry, promising she'd write as soon as possible. With that, she went over to join her parents, giving them the same reassurances she had given the Weasleys.

"Harry," The Gryffindor was sick and tired of the number of people sneaking up behind him and startling him. His wand was pointed at

Remus Lupin's left nostril before he lowered it, worn out. Remus looked decidedly worse for the wear, with new scars crossing his face and more gray in his hair than brown. His clothes were shabbier than usual and he had bags under his eyes. If Harry hadn't been sure, he would've thought the full moon had been last night instead of a week ago. "How are you feeling?"

The Gryffindor sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose. "If one more person asks me that question—"

"Yes," Remus tersely agreed, his face apologetic but unsmiling. "Sorry, old habit. I've a few things to inquire of you that I'm afraid can't wait until later."

Harry mentally groaned and rubbed his eyes, hoping Lupin would get the message. He was tired. He was hungry (though after tonight, his appetite had all but vanished). He had seen enough blood this whole week to last him two lifetimes. He was not ... in the mood ... to answer ... questions. "Remus, I don't think I can, sorry. Needless to say, it's been a rough day."

"Please, Harry." The amber-eyed lycanthrope had a note of pleading in his tone. Wearily heaving a breath, Harry crossed his arms and acted the part of the petulant teenager, pursing his lips and glaring.

"Fine. Whatever."

"Have you received any letters from our mutual friend Snuffles of late?" He started off, startling Harry from his original thoughts. He was sure Remus would want answers for the Order about what had happened tonight. By the looks of things, Tonks and Mad-Eye were with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ron and Ginny, no doubt giving their detailed accounts.

Impatient, Harry ran his fingers through his messy hair and shrugged. "I don't remember any recent ones."

Remus' brow lowered a fraction. "None at all?" Harry shook his head. "When was the last time you heard from him?"

"I dunno."

The former professor's eyes hardened slightly and he turned serious. "Try."

"I don't know!" Harry snapped in annoyance, the last of his nerves worn. He was seriously doing this now?

"Please think, Harry!" Lupin growled, his forehead wrinkled in worry more than anger.

"I don't know!" Harry burst out, garnering a few furtive looks from students and parents. "January, February? I don't keep track of everything."

He was sure Lupin was going to scold him for his outburst but instead the elder wizard became discouraged, his expression sobering and looking as if the weight of the world was suddenly borne on his shoulders. He covered his eyes with a hand and muttered to himself.

"Remus, what's wrong? Why are you asking me this?" Harry inquired, feeling his stomach knot up. Was he supposed to keep up with Sirius, send him letters frequently? Wasn't that contributing to potentially blowing his cover?

When Lupin looked at him, a sad, despondent look, Harry mentally told himself that the day couldn't possibly get any worse.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news."

He was wrong.

"Snuffles has come up missing."

Scratch that: he was dead wrong.

Harry suddenly felt the Earth being passed from Remus' shoulders to his. "No one has heard from him since February ... when he last went to visit you."

Your time has come, Harry Potter, Wickham's wicked words taunted him in a stir of echoes within his head as Lupin continued to talk. This is just the beginning. The numbness crept through him, overtaking his senses, his mind, and his confidence.

For the first time, Harry Potter felt powerless. You'll see. It's just the beginning.

Yes.

Indeed, this was only the beginning.

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A/N: Secondary title taken from William Ernest Henley's poem Invictus.

A/N 2: Again, thank you! But you haven't seen the last of me: keep a lookout for the next installment, THE BEST INTENTIONS. For now, I bid you adieu.